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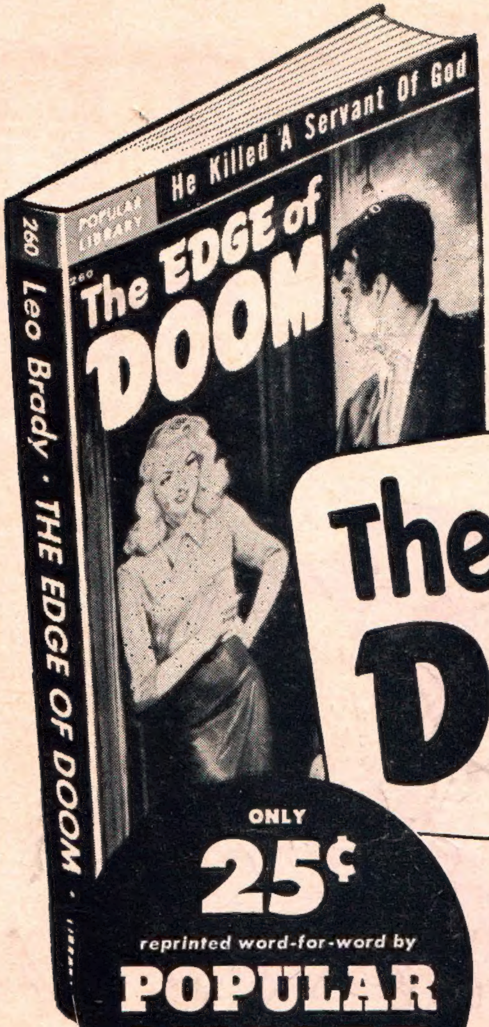
By ROBERT J. HOGAN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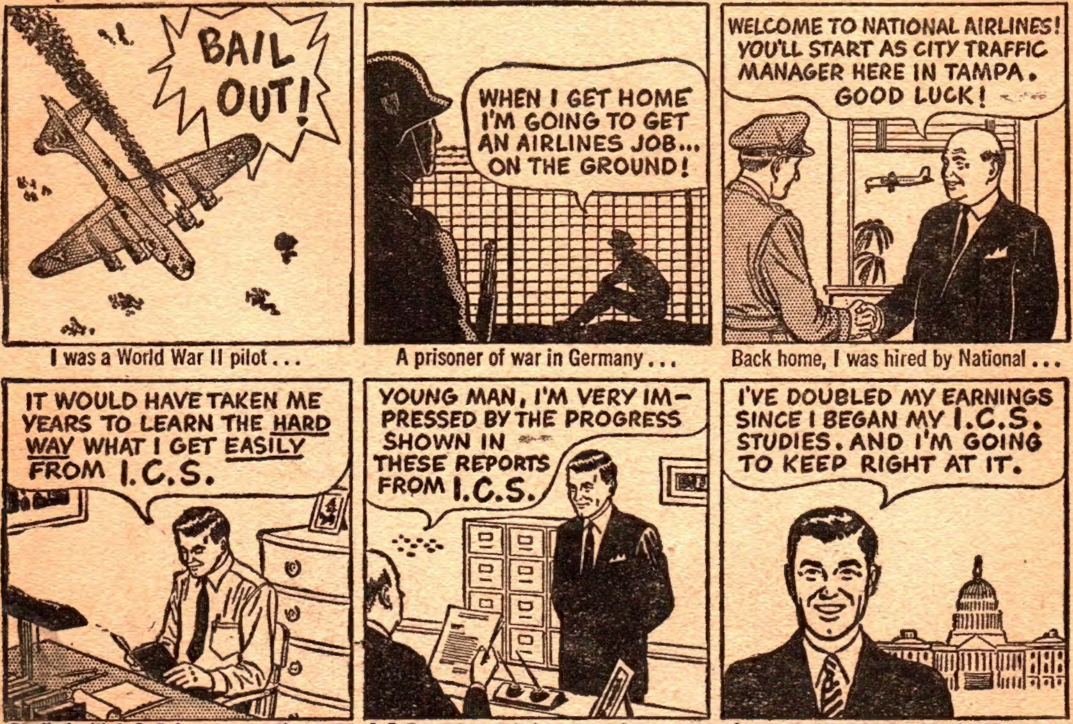
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A Full-Length Novel

LAW FOR LA MESA . . . . ROBERT J. HOGAN 11

Returning to his home range, lawyer Rod Gordon becomes an advocate of freedom for his oppressed townsmen—and faces suspicion, peril and slander as he wages a lone war against land-grabbing killers!

A Complete Novelet

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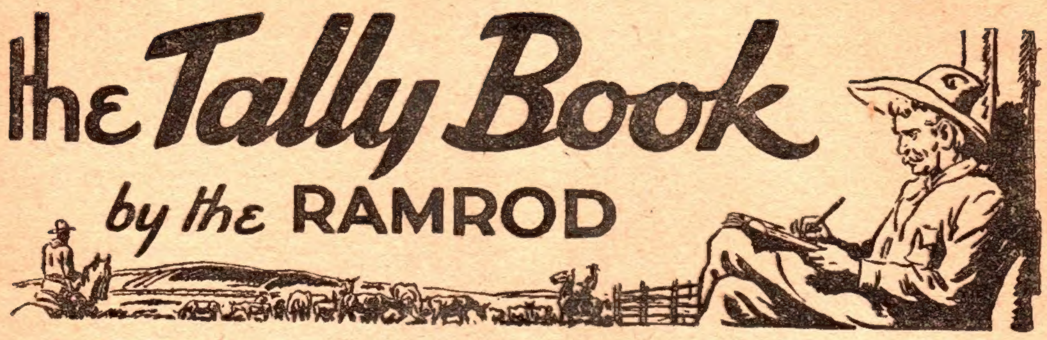
The Tally Book

by the RAMROD



A DEPARTMENT WHERE ALL HANDS GET TOGETHER TO RIDE HERD ON THE WESTERN FICTION ROUNDUP

KNOW what a snake stomper is? A fellow who stomps snakes, sure. But we happen to mean human snakes. The other kind of a snake stomper goes out equipped mebbe with a forked stick and a bag to catch his snakes. The human snake stomper comes equipped with one or two pistols and a set of chilled steel nerves.

It seems as if there have always been times of lawlessness when people couldn't depend upon regular authority to get around to them often enough, or in time to be of any real help. And in those times people with money would hire their own protection. Railroads have private police, so have banks and lots of other businesses. And often enough a rich man might hire himself a bodyguard for his personal protection.

Law of the West

The big ranches of the West had a real police problem. Their valuable property was cows and these cows were scattered over hundreds of miles of wide and open country, absolutely free, nobody watching them most of the time, no fences to enclose them, no nothing. Anybody with larceny in his soul could ride in and help himself to some of those cows and lots of loose-fingered gents had just such ideas. The ranches couldn't depend on one sheriff who had a territory bigger than some eastern states to police all by himself. So they had their own law—their own snake stompers.

Now it takes a kind of a tough character to engage in the profession of private exterminator, as you might call it. He's got to be mighty sure of himself to go up against all kinds of hombres, many of whom might be killers, might have a price on their heads, which makes them mighty shy about being caught and perfectly willing to shoot their way out.

A man like that has a sort of dubious future. But he might be an interesting character. And we're going to examine that kind of a man in our next issue's big novel, NO LAW IN PASS CREEK VALLEY, by Wayne D. Overholser.

The name of this snake stomper was Kim Logan. He worked for a ranch called the Clawhammer, where he was known as Professor Kim Logan, M.G., Master of Guncraft. He laughed when he thought about that. He could write a book on how to be a tough hand.

He had served his apprenticeship on the border with as salty a crew as a man could find. The fact that he was alive at the ripe old age of 25 proved his fitness to write the book. He was the only one of the old bunch who could do any writing; the graves of the others were scattered from the Rio to the Dakota badlands.

The Soft Spot

Yet there was a soft spot in Kim Logan's makeup. He worked less for the money Clawhammer paid him than for the love of Peg Cody, beautiful, temperamental woman owner of the ranch. Peg

(Continued on page 8)

Special Fact Features in this Issue of GIANT WESTERN

●

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TO PEOPLE
Who Want To Write
but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

needed a master of guncraft on her payroll for she was engaged in a life and death struggle with Hank Dunning, another big rancher whose ambition was to crowd Clawhammer to death and spread itself through all that range country.

Peg needed a strong man and she was the kind of woman who came under the influence of a strong man. As long as Kim Logan was the key to her control of Clawhammer and the range, she could love Kim Logan.

"The world I see all around me is made for big people," she said, "so I aim to be big, so big that all the valley will be mine. It's not just money that I want. It's respect, if you want to call it that, or prestige, or whatever. I'll have it, Kim. You'll see!"

If Kim Logan was vaguely troubled by her ruthless determination to trample over the small ranchers in her path, he tried to subdue his doubts. But there came a time when the doubts rose to a flood that swept away his crumbling loyalties and shifted his whole world to a new and crazy angle.

Then Kim Logan found that only his mastery in guncraft was left to him of all the values he had held most dear and that his wizardry with his gun alone stood between him and disaster.

NO LAW IN PASS CREEK VALLEY, Wayne D. Overholser's big new novel for our next issue, is a fine story, superbly told by a master of his profession. The action is swift and turbulent and the people are as real as those you've known all your life. An outstanding western novel.

A Tuttle Novelet

But that's not all. Marked for second place is a new novelet by the old maestro himself, W. C. Tuttle. This story is called FATE AND A FORTY-FIVE and it tells the story of a sheriff who was elected to office very much against his will.

Not only was Sunset West elected sheriff when he wanted no part of the

(Continued on page 157)

Before the Rodeos Came

By

MARK KNIGHT

A True Story of the Oregon Range

FOLKS weren't calling them rodeos yet, but every so often the men, and sometimes the women, of upper Oregon would get together in the 1860s and 70s to show off their skill as riders and as cattle ropers and branders.

One such event at Wenatchee, in 1868, drew large crowds to witness a horse race between two famous equine contenders. "Lightfoot," owned by Drew Morris, had won six races in a row; "Shadow," owned by Sheffield Smith, had won five out of nine races. Odds were about even.

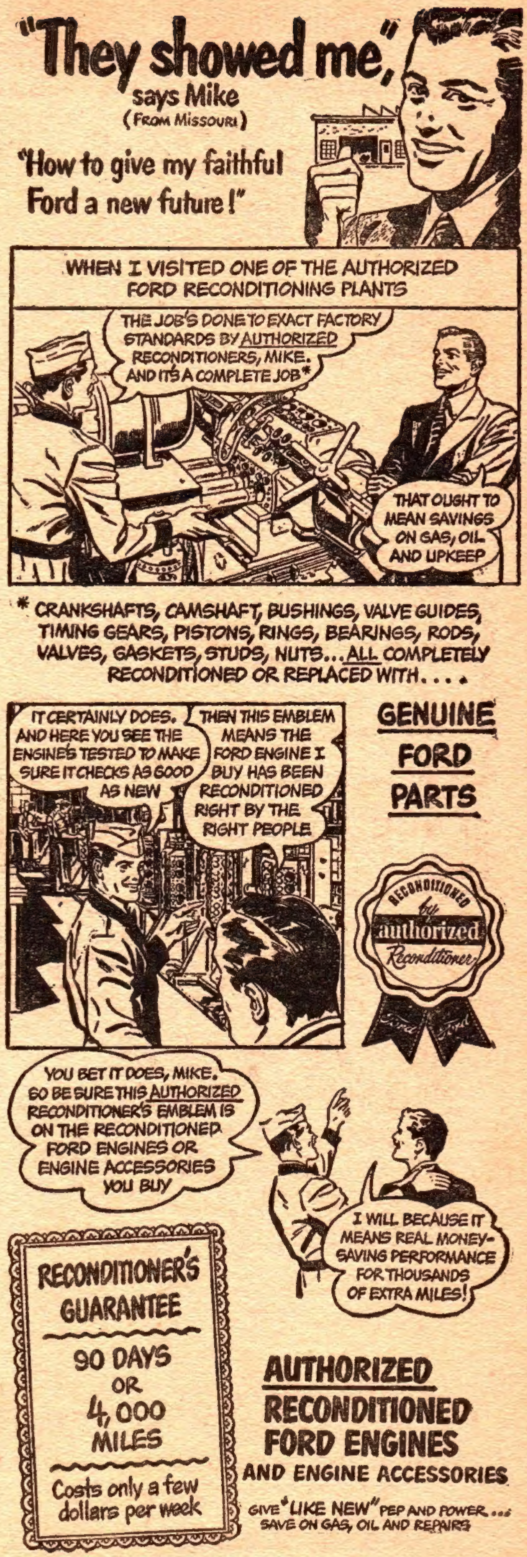
The original agreement was that the owners would each ride their own horses. But Sheffield Smith had suffered a leg injury, and asked the other horse owners if he could appoint someone to ride Shadow for him. They agreed. He nodded to a young person in soft leather jeans, a heavy shirt and dark hat well down on face. The young person mounted up, and at the signal, the seven horses were off.

Five of the contenders were soon left far behind. As predicted, this was to be a race between Lightfoot and Shadow. For more than half the appointed distance they raced collar to collar.

Past the halfway mark, Shadow made his effort, surging forward, inches at a time. At the crossing line, he was first across by better than his own length.

His young rider dismounted and raced toward the injured Smith, who stretched out his arms to receive his jockey. The jockey's hat fell off in the embrace, and long yellow hair cascaded to the rider's shoulders.

The winning jockey had been Mrs. Mary Smith, Sheffield Smith's wife!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BASIL HEATTER
BIG EYE

when she said

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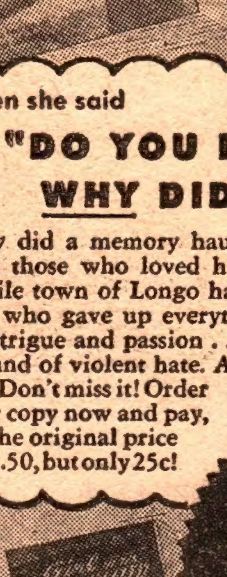
A speeding car tried to run down Pete. A strange woman was murdered. Why was Pete involved in the crime?



THE GIRL IN THE SPIKE-HEELED SHOES
Maybelle was a small-town girl with a bad reputation, but a shocking incident changed her entire life!

SOMEWHERE in this HOUSE

SOMEWHERE IN THIS HOUSE
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LAW for LA MESA

A NOVEL BY

ROBERT J. HOGAN

I

FOR more than ten years now, old Blue Harmon hadn't been seen wearing his famous pearl-stocked six-shooters, but he had them on this afternoon. It wasn't surprising to Rod Gordon, though, to see that he had kept them shiny and clean. He loved those guns.

Blue Harmon himself, however, had not stayed in shape like his guns. He was an old man now. Twenty years ago when Rod Gordon had been a button,

Returning to his home range, lawyer Rod Gordon becomes an advocate of freedom for his oppressed townsmen!

Blue Harmon had been big and strong. He'd been a tophand at cattle, cards, whisky or six-shooters. It hurt to see the old man who once had been his ideal with fingers gnarled with rheumatism, with face sagging and heavily lined.

Blue Harmon looked about Rod Gordon's new law office and dropped his great soggy body into a stiff-backed chair. He hung there, not much more secure than a feather bed on a stool.

The little law office was up over Lute Wormer's barber shop. It was reached by a long, steep flight of stairs rising along the outside of the building. Those stairs were enough to make a young man a little short of wind, to say nothing of an old fellow like Blue Harmon.

Rod gave old Blue a moment to catch his breath, then, smiling, laid down his paper and held out his hand.

"It's good to see you, Mr. Harmon."

Blue ignored the hand. He studied Rod suspiciously.

"What happened to you since you became a lawyer?" he demanded.

"I don't know what you mean," said Rod, a bit puzzled.

"Nobody ever called me 'mister' unless he was after something. Even all you younkers called me Blue. It kept me young."

"Sorry, Blue." Rod laughed. "You get used to calling people by their last names back East."

"Must be the heck of a place—back East."

"It is, in some ways. That's why I wanted to come back home to La Mesa to practice law."

Blue straightened on his chair. "If you ain't changed, I'm mighty glad to see you back, Rod."

"What makes you think I may have changed?"

BLUE'S eyes wandered over the dark suit, the starched collar and flowing bow tie.

"You don't look much like the hell-for-horsehide young buck I taught to draw and shoot." Blue shook his head. "You was sure headed for bein' a trouble-maker if you took a notion, up to the time your dad sent you packing East."

"I hope I'll make myself worth the privation Dad had to know in order to send me to study law." Rod paused a moment, soberly. "I only wish he had lived to see me come back home."

"Well," Blue said, squinting at him with his old aiming eye, "your dad was a strong man—a rough customer if anybody bucked him from the wrong side." He shook his head again. "I don't know if he'd cotton to you in that stiff collar and them clothes."

"I've grown up, Blue," Rod said, with a tolerant smile. "I've become a professional man like Dad wanted me to be."

"Just so you ain't a fancy pants, all right," said Blue Harmon. "I only hope you ain't got too grown up. Makes a man soft, sometimes, trusting to his brain more than to his strength and his guns. And the way things are shaping up out here around La Mesa, there's no room for a soft man."

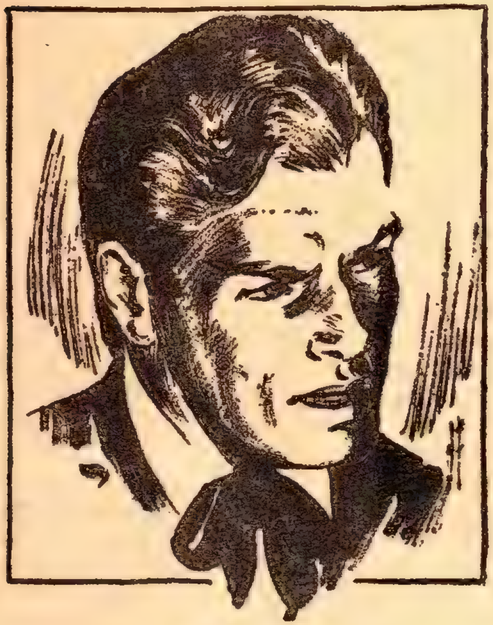
Rod waited, and old Blue began fumbling about the faded green vest that hung on him like a wet sack. He fished in first one pocket and then another. Rod watched him, hurt to see what age had done to him. He wanted to ask his reason for wearing the guns, but decided to wait for the old man to tell him in his own good time.

Blue's guns had always interested Rod, as a young lad and as a young man. Blue was a cross draw man who had always worn his guns up on his hips. Now, after so long a time of not carrying them, he had just managed to get the wide gun-belts about him by catching the buckle tongue in the last hole of the black leather band.

A holster hung centered to the belt on either side, the bottom of each pointed back and down. The pearl stocks hung forward ready to be cross grabbed. There were shiny brass cartridge rims glinting from the cylinders.

The afternoon was nearly hot enough to bake a pie on the street. All windows of the new office were open but all that came in was dust from the drag of hoofs and boots in Main Street.

"What I came to see you about, Rod—" Blue Harmon went through his vest pockets twice. Sweat ran off his forehead, dripped off the bulb of his nose and his chin. He took out a red bandanna and wiped his face, then found the document he was searching for. He held it out to the young lawyer.


ROD GORDON

"There's the danged thing causing all the trouble," he said. "If you'd opened up this office before today maybe trouble wouldn't have got this far." He coughed. "Seems like a man's word ain't no good any more, and anybody knows my word's my bond. I told 'em at the bank I'd paid. What difference does it make if I mislaid the tax receipt?"

Rod took the paper, saw the printed words across the folded front:

DISPOSSESS NOTICE

Blue nodded to the paper.

"There's been a mistake. I paid my taxes. You straighten it out." He got up and started for the door, then paused. "Or if the East has softened you up so you ain't man enough to keep 'em from puttin' me off my own place, then I'll handle it my own way when they come up tonight at six o'clock to put me out."

He slapped the two holsters at his bulging hips and reached for the door knob.

"Blue," Rod Gordon said hastily, "don't go off half-cocked. We can straighten this out some way. And for heaven's sake don't go blasting at the sheriff if he comes to put you out. It won't get you anything."

Blue's old gray eyes were hard as he said: "Cuss you, Rod Gordon. I was afraid you'd come back soft." His voice quavered.

Rod simply repeated: "It won't get you anything but trouble, resisting the law."

Blue shuffled out and slammed the door. The flimsy frame building shuddered. Then Rod heard the stairs groan under Blue Harmon's weight as he went down them. . . .

THERE had been two primary ambitions in Rod Gordon's life. One had been instilled in him by his father as he had grown from boyhood to young manhood. That father, John Gordon, had been both father and mother to his son almost since birth, for Rod's mother had died when he had been about a year and a half old. Rod had a little tintype of her in his wallet, but aside from that, and a vague memory of what his father had told him about her, she might as well have been a stranger.

John Gordon's honesty and integrity had been as unshakable as the square table mountain towering above the town, and his son had been reared to hold the same ideals. Now that Rod was back home he meant to show such parental teachings had been all the more firmly entrenched with the years.

Rod Gordon started down the stairs, the dispossess notice in his hands. He paused to flick the dust from his black boots. The townspeople of La Mesa, the old settlers as well as the new citizens who were being lured to the town by the new railroad that was being built, must see him not only as a serious young man, but one of dignity, who cared for the details of his personal appearance. It was human nature to put more trust in a polished gentleman than in a raffish one.

He ran down the stairs to the board walk and headed up the street toward the bank. There was an activity in the town unknown in the old days, and he gloried in it, although he had heard that some of the old settlers didn't like the idea of the railroad which was coming to town, and which was responsible for the new hustle and bustle. They declared it would ruin La Mesa, that all sorts of unwanted people would be drawn here. Lots of new people had arrived already, and more were coming in every day.

There was a surprising amount of building going on in the town. Every vacant lot seemed to be sprouting a structure of some kind. Hammers and saws made a constant din in the still heat.

All this meant the chance of success for Rod Gordon, and he exulted in the idea. For ambition that would have success in his calling as his goal was second only to the regard for honesty he had been taught by his father. Two great ambitions—to be looked upon as a successful man, and an honest one.

In Rod Gordon's early years he had known the meaning of privation, hard work, and want. But ahead of him now were bright prospects. Eventually he meant to be one of the leading citizens in this fast-growing town of his. Already he had picked out the site for the fine home he would some day build.

He strode up the board walk, bowing to acquaintances and smiling with what he considered just the proper reserve. But he was feeling a certain excitement in being on his way to see Colonel Ball on business. He had seen the colonel only once in the two days he had been back in town—yesterday when he had gone to the bank to open a meager bank account. He had seen the distinguished graying head bent over a desk, the broad shoulders bent over a legal form the colonel had been reading. The local weekly paper which had been sent to Rod regularly had printed much about Colonel Ball. He must be a fine man, Rod had decided, an asset to a growing town like La Mesa.

As Rod walked past the courthouse he noted the addition the colonel had had built to it, joining his bank with the courthouse. Rod turned at the bank entrance and went in.

A small, wiry bank guard in a gray uniform—an innovation in La Mesa—walked up to Rod.

"You wanted something?" he asked.

Rod nodded toward the colonel. "I'll see the president when he's free."

He saw the colonel glance at him and smile slightly, then turn back to the man who sat beside his desk—Arch Whitman, a rancher up Kimble Gulch. The colonel reached for a paper that Arch had just signed.

While Rod waited, he studied the guard, curious and interested. The man carried his guns low at the tips of his long fingers. He had eyes like those of a dead fish. It gave Rod a crawling sensation to be looked at with such eyes.

INSIDE the balustrade that separated the courthouse passage and the banker's office from the bank lobby Arch Whitman was rising.

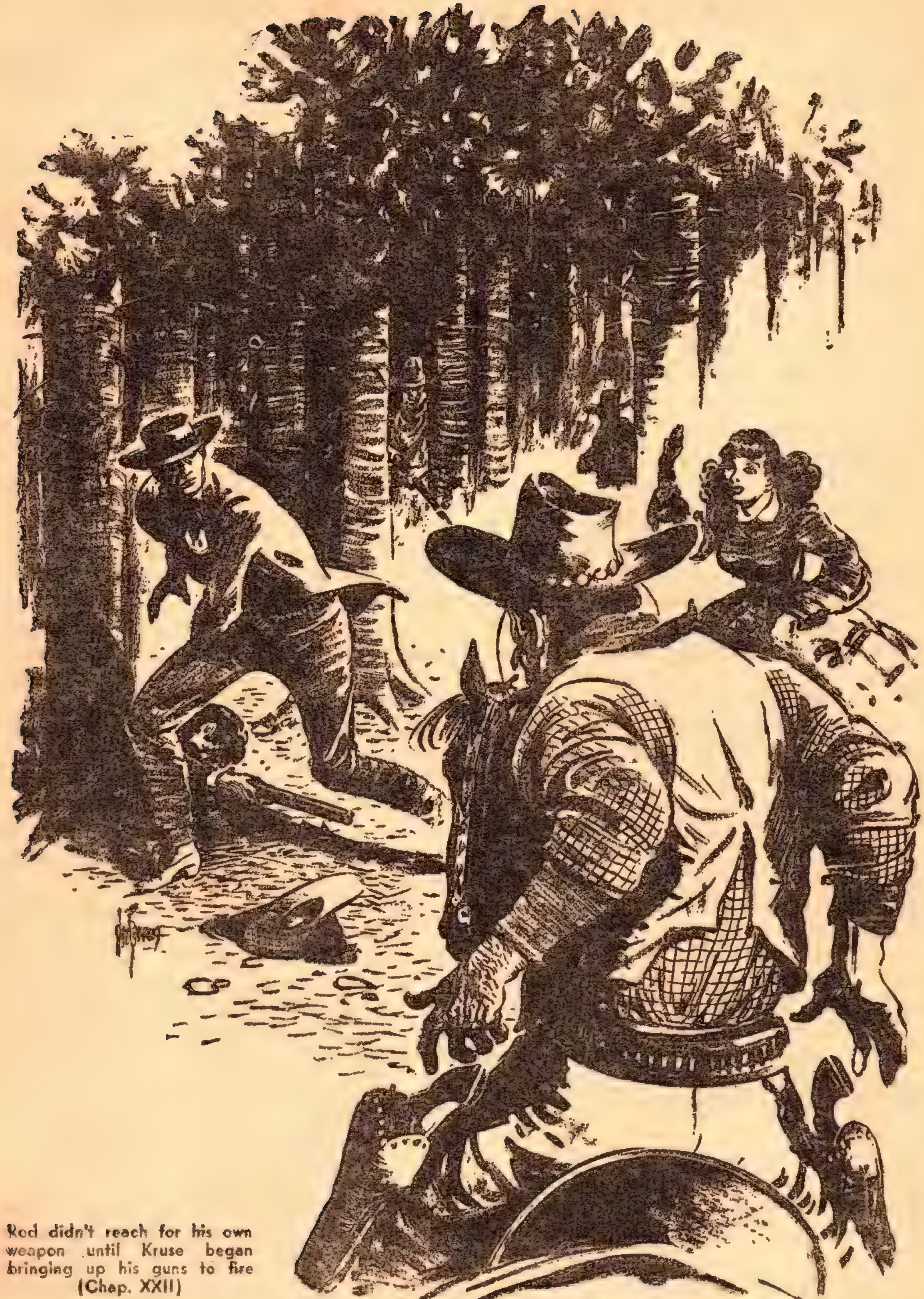
"Thanks, Colonel," he said, and as he started out, Rod started in. The colonel stood up to greet him.

Colonel Ball was tall and easy-mannered and smiling. He had a long face, rather wide at the forehead, and keen eyes. He held out his hand.

"It's a pleasure to greet the new attorney in town," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't see you when you came in yesterday to open an account with us."

He was an impressive gentleman with a graciousness that instilled confidence. He was, Rod thought, the kind of successful man he would like to become himself.

The chairs were deep and comfortable, with the top of each arm formed by a steer's horn. Rod settled back.



Rod didn't reach for his own weapon until Kruse began bringing up his guns to fire
(Chap. XXII)

"I suppose you're here about old Mr. Harmon," Colonel Ball said. "I'm sorry to have to take action against the old fellow."

A little puzzled, Rod said: "You must have read my mind, Colonel."

Ball answered somewhat sharply: "A banker must keep his finger on the pulse of things, must know what's going on. I've already heard that Harmon has been up to your office, so I've been expecting you."

"The point is, Colonel," Rod said earnestly, "that old Blue Harmon has always had a good memory and a reputation for flawless honesty."

"No doubt," Ball said. He sat back and studied his desk top. "Mr. Gordon," he said abruptly, "La Mesa is a big town now. It's not the sleepy cowtown in which you grew up, and in which Blue Harmon acquired this reputation for honesty."

"I agree with you, sir, but—"

"In a growing place like La Mesa," the colonel went on smoothly, "with swindlers coming in every day to fleece honest citizens, a man must have proof of the ownership of the property he claims. He must be ready to produce tax receipts."

"Blue's an old man," Rod said defensively. "He's simply mislaid his tax receipts. As far as that goes, who *can* dig up three-year-old tax receipts?"

"I can," Colonel Ball answered coldly. "I've always watched such details, taken care of what is mine."

"Then you intend going through with this? Having Blue dispossessed at six tonight?"

The colonel smiled, spread his hands wide. "What else can I do? There's no room for sentiment in business. As a lawyer you know the law must take its course."

"I'm sure I could raise the money to cover those back taxes, if he actually owes them," Rod said. "I'd be willing to—"

"It's gone too far," Ball said, rising. "The taxes were delinquent and there was a public sale, advertised according to law. My bank bought the property."

"Don't send anyone there this evening," Rod begged. "Blue's mad, and wearing his guns. He'll be likely to start trouble if the sheriff uses force to get him out. Let me talk to him tomorrow. I'll—"

Colonel Ball shook his head and smiled regretfully. "My boy, there's no sense in putting this thing off. It's done, and that's that. I can't make individual cases of these matters. There's too much going on. While I'm being lenient to some old man, sharpers who are coming to town on every stage are likely to steal me blind behind my back." He bowed again. "Now, if you'll excuse me—" He looked past Rod Gordon. "Come in, Sheriff. I've been expecting you."

II

AS Rod Gordon was preparing to take leave of the bank president, a lot of thoughts were seething in his mind. Quick-tempered as he was, he thought what a satisfaction it would be to snatch this Colonel Ball by the shirt front, snap him up short, and beat some humanity into him. He thought too, about what he had learned in law school. "The law must take its course!" "Never take the law into your own hands." "Never lose your temper."

That was particularly applicable to one John Roderick Gordon. He'd had trouble with his temper ever since he'd been a hot-headed kid. He'd been a holy terror when his temper got the upper hand—he still was, for that matter. And he realized how essential it was to his success to control his temper. Losing it could contribute to failure faster than almost anything else.

But even as he bowed to the colonel, with somewhat exaggerated politeness, his face was hot, and he could feel the strength rush into his strong arms to activate them behind rocklike fists. He hardly realized that he was the man who was backing off and bowing and saying, "Thank you, sir, for your time."

He saw the colonel looking at him strangely, as if the low, controlled tone of his voice were the warning note of a danger bell.

Then Rod saw the sheriff, as the lawman approached the railing. Sheriff Dan Kruse was a tall, lean man, wearing range clothes, a plaid shirt of red and yellow, and a light tan cowhide vest fitted with pockets for .45 cartridges. His face was hard, and the eyes that stabbed Gordon were cruel and full of cunning. He carried two Colts well down, and the star on his vest was large and fairly new.

The two men with him each wore a deputy badge.

Unaccountably, at first sight of those three men, Rod Gordon had a sickish feeling. It was as if something strange and ugly, for which he had no explanation, had happened to his home town.

As he started for the door he heard the sheriff, who had been talking to the fish-eyed bank guard, say:

"See you later, Idaho."

"Idaho" cackled, saying, "If you need help gettin' the old buzzard out, you know where I am."

Outside, the first thing Rod Gordon did was look to see if Blue Harmon's buckboard was gone from in front of the general store. When he didn't see it, he stopped to ask Ike Crandall, the storekeeper, if he'd seen old Blue leave.

A high-sided freight wagon stood before the store like an anchor to the six dozing mules hitched to it. Ike and the freight swamper were unloading wooden packing cases and taking them into the store. Ike spied Gordon as the lawyer came down the board walk, and paused in his work.

The proprietor of the general store was a little man, round-headed, small-eyed. He spoke in a quick, clipped voice which still held its New England twang.

"Just thinking of you, Rod!" he called. "There's a box filled with bolts of gingham in this load. Good lumber in it. Make a good bookcase out of it for your law books. When I get the gingham out you can have it for ten cents."

"Save it for me," Rod said. "How long ago did Blue Harmon drive off—did you notice?"

Ike nodded to the packing case he was about to lift. "Catch hold t'other end while I think how long ago it was, Rod."

ROD took the other end of the case and they carried it into the store. When they set it down Ike Crandall jerked his head toward the back of the store to where some country hams which hung from the ceiling hid a space from the rest of the store. Rod followed him back there.

"Rod," Ike said, speaking from behind a gnarled hand, "Blue's figuring on trouble. He's figuring the showdown's come on this whole tarnation business that's been pesterin' the life out of folks hereabouts."

"I know he's pretty desperate," Rod Gordon said. "But he didn't say anything to me about a showdown."

"Fiddlesticks," Ike said. "Blue didn't figure you'd be able to do anything for him. He just went to you to see if you'd stand up for him, and to make his resistin' kind of legal."

"How would seeing me make anything he did legal?"

"Well, you know how Blue is. He kind of figures if a man gets warned first, then it ain't his fault—I mean Blue's—if he stands up for his rights."

"You mean he's actually thinking of gunning the sheriff?"

Ike winked. "Blue can shave that badge-totin' ringworm if he wants, at ten paces. So he figures if he scares the sheriff enough, Colonel Ball'll slow down on takin' everything he can grab on supposed past due taxes or short term mortgages."

"Why didn't Blue tell me this?"

"I reckon he figures you went soft in the East and wouldn't do anything about it noway."

"But, Ike, a man can't take the law into his own hands!"

"First thing you learned in law school, huh? Mmm—that's the way Blue and me had you figured." Ike moved out from behind the hanging hams. "I got to get the rest of this load inside before that cloud over to the west decides to be a thunderstorm."

Rod went out with him and walked on There were no more shots and the echoes had died away before he reached down the street toward his office. Arch Whitman was waiting for him at the foot of the steps.

"Rod," he said, "I thought I might get you to tell me something, if it wouldn't cost too much."

He followed Rod up the stairs.

"I signed some papers up at the bank this afternoon just as you come in," he said, when they reached the office.

"Yes, I saw you. What did you sign, Arch?"

The rancher pulled on his mud-colored beard. "Well, there was the mortgage and then another paper, a note he said secured the mortgage."

"And a bond that went with the mortgage?"

"That's right. What worries me now is I recollect that note said I'd pay the thousand dollars I'm borrowing on demand. Just now I heard they're figuring to put Blue Harmon off his place for something about unpaid back taxes. I got to thinking. If I spend that thousand dollars, and the bank tells me to pay upon a minute's notice, and I can't, can they take over my place?"

"That's right."

"What must I do, then?"

"Play safe," Rod Gordon said. "Go back to the bank right now, pay off the note and the mortgage and get your papers. Unless you think you can turn any cattle you buy into cash at a minute's notice."

Arch Whitman nodded. "How much do I owe you, Rod?"

"I'll get you the next time," said the young lawyer. "Now I've got to get a horse and head for Blue Harmon's place. I want to see if I can calm him down before he starts a fight. . . ."

On his way to the livery stable Rod Gordon thought of his own twin guns hanging on the wall beside his desk. He had hung them there just yesterday. A kind of symbol of the change in his life, and he was glad of it.

At the livery stable on the back street Hack Midland, who ran it, was sitting in the doorway to catch the slight breeze.

"It's hot," Hack said, as Rod approached.

Hack was a gaunt, swarthy man. His long face and sallow complexion always reminded Rod of Hack's favorite little yellow mare.

"It'll be hotter if I don't get to Blue Harmon's place and stop him from making a fool of himself," Rod declared, flushed and plainly anxious.

"You mean you'd try to stop him from downin' that coyote sheriff, Rod?" Hack Midland's tone was unbelieving.

"Blue used to be good with guns," Rod said, "but he's too old now. He . . . Saddle up somethin' that'll travel, will you, Hack?"

HACK stood solidly in the doorway, shaking his head.

"Not to stop Blue from teachin' that lawman a thing or two about puttin' an old man off his place on some trumped-up business about not payin' taxes three years ago. Blue Harmon always paid his taxes. Son, you just leave old Blue alone. He knows what he's doin'."

"He doesn't! He hasn't got a chance. The sheriff has two deputies with him and that fish-eyed little gunhand bank guard of Colonel Ball's offered to go along, too, if they needed more help."

"That a fact?" Hack demanded.

"I heard it myself."

"Mmm—I figured Sheriff Kruse was going up by himself." Hack spun around and yelled, "Bump! Bump Yost!"

Hack's stocky little stableman came hurrying from a stall.

"Lead out that new fast wall-eyed gelding."

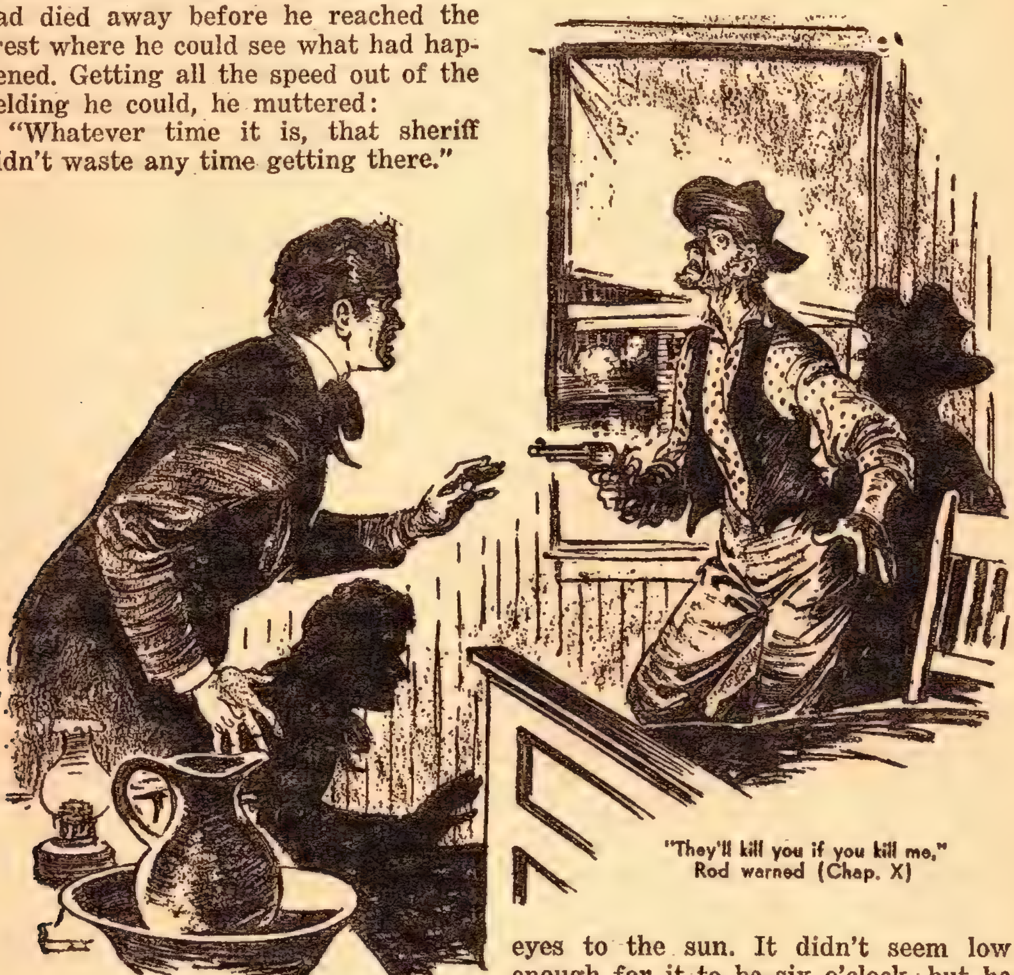
They saddled the gelding and Rod got into the saddle and headed out at a gallop.

The gelding was fast all right, but soon slowed, although Rod crowded him as much as he dared, without windbreaking him. Rod's watch had stopped, so he couldn't tell how near six o'clock it was, but surely it was not so late that he wouldn't be in plenty of time.

He was pushing the animal up the last

rise when he heard gunshots ahead of him, over the crest. It was a long way to the top of the rise, but he put spurs to the gelding and they plunged on. There were no more shots and the echoes had died away before he reached the crest where he could see what had happened. Getting all the speed out of the gelding he could, he muttered:

"Whatever time it is, that sheriff didn't waste any time getting there."



"They'll kill you if you kill me," Rod warned (Chap. X)

There had been two shots, fairly close together. Of course there was a chance they hadn't anything to do with Blue Harmon, but he lived in the direction from which they had come. And it was hardly likely that any hunter would have to fire twice to get his game.

Anyway, Rod was pretty certain that the shots had been fired from a six-gun, twice in quick succession. Or two six-guns, one fired just after the other.

The gelding was lathered and blowing hard when they got to the top of the rise.

From there, Rod could see a column of smoke rising beyond the ridge. It went straight up without any disturbance of breeze to dissipate it. Rod raised his eyes to the sun. It didn't seem low enough for it to be six o'clock, but he couldn't be sure.

Pushing the gelding on, in a few minutes more Rod saw, with horror, that beyond and below them flames were consuming Blue Harmon's ranch house. Already the fire had made such headway that there was no hope of saving the place. And there was no one in sight.

III

FOR a moment Rod Gordon sat his saddle, staring, then he gigged the chestnut and sent him down the slope toward the burning house. A ghastly thought gripped him. Blue Harmon might be in that flaming house!

At the foot of the hill Rod leaped off and began running toward the house, leaving the gelding to follow if he would. Before Rod reached the house the heat of the flames drove him back. Moving as close as he could he tried to see through the open door. There was no sign of Blue Harmon. No sign of anyone in the house.

He turned to look at the barn and corral. They were still all right. The fire was drifting in the other direction, and they probably would not catch.

Blue's buckboard was at the corral gate and his team was in the corral, standing in one corner with their heads raised, and their ears cocked, trembling as they watched the fire with apprehension.

Rod saw boot tracks in the dirt before the house, then he saw something else—a track of fresh blood! And by the burning porch was a pool of it.

Rod followed the tracks of the scuffing boots. Those tracks had been made by men carrying a heavy load—one like Blue Harmon's fat body. The boots dragged with the load.

Fifty feet farther along were the tracks of wagon wheels and a team; draught horses. Rod could tell that by the size of the hoofs.

The wagon had been driven off toward town with the horses digging in as if the driver had been in a rush. The young lawyer's eyes followed the marks of the wagon and the running hoofs until distance blotted them out.

There was no use trying to fight the fire, and the slight breeze from the west was carrying the smoke and sparks up and off from the barn and corral. So they would hardly go also.

Rod watched the roof cave in and the cabin sides fold up and crackle in a mass of sparks. The sun-dried timber made tender eating for the savage flames.

His livery horse had followed and was grazing on the bunch grass beside the well where the grass grew high and thick, being so well-watered. Gordon let him alone as he gazed off toward the west to the little place where he had grown up. He could see the low, rambling ranch house a half-mile away, but there was no smoke of supper cooking now, as there had been at this time of the evening when he had lived there.

Colonel Ball and the bank owned the old place now, Lute Wormer, the barber, had told him. Though Rod knew that the bank had taken over the ranch for the mortgage, after his father's death—the mortgage which had given Rod himself his education in the law. But at what a bitter cost to his father! The whole area, he had heard, would make part of a vast ranch for the right party when he came to buy and paid the price the bank asked.

Rod's own deserted old home was the only place within miles. So it was not strange that no one came running to old Blue's burning home. But it gave Rod a queer, unreal feeling.

Then as he stood listening to the crackle and sputter of the flames, another sound reached him, one so faint and eerie that at first he thought his imagination was playing tricks on his tortured emotions.

He suddenly realized, though, that what he was hearing was music, and there was something familiar about the tune, the way it was played, and the instrument—a mouth harp.

He headed toward the corral and the barn. The sound had come from that direction. The twanging, whiny notes became louder as he neared. He opened the corral gate quietly and the frightened team skittered to the far corner. He crossed the corral, smelled the hay from the half-filled mow, through the open barn door.

AS he neared, he recognized the tune and suddenly realized who was playing "The Dying Cowboy," the only tune that particular player he well remembered knew how to play on his old mouth harp.

Rod passed through the corral, moved quietly back of the barn, and saw the little fellow who was sitting there twanging his mouth harp.

"Hello, Loony," he said quietly.

The player turned his head slowly and nodded.

"You Rod Gordon?" he said.

"That's right."

"Didn't hardly know you, in them clothes."

But Rod knew "Loony" Tate, a gnarled little figure with a pushed-up face, and whose little eyes without much eyebrow or eyelash gave him a half-witted appearance. Loony, who had always been known to be eccentric, lived alone in a shack up on the mesa, but those who classed him as feeble-minded were wrong. His appearance had given him his nickname, and a certain shyness and realization that he was "different" had made him aloof. Loony Tate looked about the same as Rod remembered him, except perhaps he was grayer.

"Sitting back here, Loony," Rod said, "you must not have seen what happened to old Blue Harmon."

Loony began twanging his harp again. He pursed his lips about the instrument and stroked in the proper solemn time with the flattened fingers of his right hand. He finished another bar of "The Dying Cowboy," then he lowered the tiny instrument and looked up at Rod.

"A man sitting behind a barn like this couldn't see what was going on t'other side, now could he?"

"I don't see how he could," Rod said and tried again. "You and I always got along when I lived up at the next ranch, Loony. Remember when you and I went up lion hunting one fall right after the first snow?"

Loony nodded, stroked out another couple of notes. "You was one of us then, Rod. You didn't wear no fancy clothes and have eddication."

"I'm the same as I was," Rod said and hunkered down beside him, disregarding the dried manure and chaff. "Bet you saw 'em get old Blue, didn't you, Loony?"

"Maybe I did. Maybe not. I ain't saying. 'Taint healthy to see things."

"Blue never did you a bad turn."

"No, sir. Nor you, Rod. But I ain't saying what I seen, even if it would make folks shake and shiver and get mad enough to hang some other folks."

"Like what wouldn't you say?" Rod pursued.

Loony looked over at him with a sly grin. "They teach you trickin' at the school where you went, Rod? But you ain't tricking me into saying what I seen that'd maybe make you kill a sheriff or anybody else that done such a thing to old Blue."

"How come you saw it without being seen, Loony?"

Loony shrugged his thick shoulders. "Seen 'em coming. Old Blue, he'd said they was putting him out tonight." Loony nodded toward a knoll. "I was resting up there when they come."

"What happened? Did old Blue come out shooting?"

The crafty look came into the beady eyes. Loony's wide slit of a mouth turned up, and he made a chuckling sound. "You reckon to get my big mouth to working, don't you?"

"It's for old Blue," Rod said.

"Well, I don't figure to have no colonel nor no sheriff gunnin' me down," Loony said. "I'd be obliged, Rod, if you'd forget you seen me here."

"I wouldn't tell who told me."

"I ain't saying no more." Loony got up, shook his head. "Nope. They'd be gunnin' for me if I was to tell."

Rod studied the ageless little man. "Maybe it's best then, if you don't tell, Loony. We wouldn't want a lot of shooting if it could be helped."

Loony pushed his old gray hat over his eyes and scratched the back of his head. He began, "On the other side of the fence—"

"Whoever wronged Blue ought to be brought to justice."

"Uh-huh." Loony shook his head. "But you can figure it out for yourself. I'll say Blue weren't given a fair chance."

LOONY hitched his old six-shooter up and turned.

"Reckon that pretty daughter of the

colonel'll be getting you talking and you'll say I told you Blue didn't get shot square."

"I don't even know her," Rod said gravely.

"She's a hummer," Loony said. "Friendly-like. Talks real pleasant to me. She's rode up past my place coupla times now. All by herself. I showed her some trails 'fore I figured out she's likely around looking for more land for her old man to grab." He hitched his gun again, started off across the valley. "I got to get on to get my supper."

There wasn't any use trying to stop him. Rod knew that. Loony Tate could be more stubborn than any mule. He waved and said:

"Good to see you again, Loony. And don't worry about me saying anything about you."

Rod went back and got his horse. The fire had burned down almost to embers. There was nothing he could do here.

He mounted and headed for town, following the trail the wagon had taken. Suddenly, out of the tail of his eye a movement along the ridge caught his attention. A lone rider there stood out against the sky for a moment, but too far off to be recognized even if it were someone Rod knew.

The rider lingered for a moment, peering over the edge of the ridge as if he believed himself hidden from sight, then he dropped below the ridge and was gone from sight.

IV

MAXINE BALL sat straight and tense, silently studying her father across the supper table, waiting for him to speak. Her dark hair was drawn back from her face in a roll at her neck as she had worn it on the afternoon ride from which she had just returned. Her skin, healthily tanned to a rich creaminess, accented the blue of her eyes—that of a clear sky.

Colonel Ball was not interested in his food. He seemed preoccupied, as if waiting for something to happen. He turned quickly as the sound of footsteps announced that someone was coming up to the front porch.

Maxine drew a quick, hard breath as a knock came to the front door. Her father got up quickly and strode down the wide hall to the door. He flung it open and Maxine heard him say:

"Oh, it's you. How many times do you have to be told to take the groceries to the back door?"

She heard the handyman from the grocery mumble something, then the door slammed. When her father returned, she said:

"Dad, you're so jumpy, you're giving yourself away."

He came to a jerky stop. "What do you mean, giving myself away?"

"You know you don't feel right about ordering old Blue Harmon shot."

"Who says I ordered him shot?"

"News gets around."

"Who the devil has been talking? My own daughter—"

"Dad," she said, "I'm twenty-one. I can listen to what I like."

Colonel Ball settled back. "Maxine," he said, "I've been going to mention a matter to you and I may as well speak of it now. You know we have a new young attorney in town? Rod Gordon. Has an office up over the barber shop."

"Dad! No!" There was a snap in her voice. "Don't do it, please!"

"Do what?"

"Ask me to be nice to this lawyer so you can make use of him! I won't!"

"Why, I had no intention—"

She laughed shortly. "Maybe you can fool other people, but you can't fool me. You asked me to be nice to Waldo Stone when he first came to town, didn't you? Well, I did. It wasn't difficult. I was lonely, and Waldo's harmless. Now you've got him and his newspaper right where you want them, haven't you? Well, I simply won't hurt him by being 'nice' to this new attorney."

Colonel Ball glared at her. "For the love of heaven, Maxine, I didn't mean for you to fall in love with Stone. I don't want any newspaperman for a son-in-law."

She leaned forward, controlled her

voice with effort. "Dad, did it ever occur to you that when I decide to marry anybody it will, for the first time in my life, be my own business and none of yours?"

"But Waldo Stone!" Ball made a wry face. "You couldn't—marry him, Maxine."

"I didn't say I'm going to—or that I'm not. I just refuse to hurt him deliberately. What's more, I refuse to do any smiling at this Rod Gordon for you. To tell you the truth, I wish you'd count me out of anything that will bring you any more power."

"Maxine!" Ball's voice was pleading. "We're together in everything. Don't you understand?"

"We never have been together. You never even give me a thought except when you need some help only a woman can give. But I'm through! After old Blue Harmon! I liked him, Dad, and if I had found out soon enough that you'd ordered him shot I certainly would have saved him—somehow."

Colonel Ball's fists clenched, and his voice rose. "Who the devil says I—"

"You're losing control, Dad," Maxine said coolly. "Ah Sing will hear you in the kitchen."

WITH an effort the colonel forced himself to relax. In a more modulated voice he said:

"Maxine, I merely ordered Blue Harmon dispossessed. He had plenty of notice, so if he chose to resist—"

"Naturally. So you told Sheriff Kruse to go prepared. You knew what Kruse would do. He'd rather make a bloody example than a peaceful arrest any day. That's the kind of butcher he is. That's why you got him made sheriff in the first place, a stranger to this town, when there were so many more old-time residents better fitted for the job."

The colonel tried to look hurt. "What kind of a daughter have I got, anyway?" he sighed. "Turning against me when I need you? Haven't you any loyalty?"

"If I hadn't been so loyal to you in the past, Dad," she said gravely, "I would have been better off. And you want to know what kind of a daughter you've got? The kind you made, Dad, a daughter you trained to be gracious and charming to those you want to impress, a girl you trained to keep out of your way while you're cooking up some secret deal that will bring you more dollars. Never a sign of love or affection for me. Never—"

"You can't talk to your father like that!" Ball roared. "I've given you everything a girl could want, an education, position—"

"Everything?" Maxine lifted her brows. "How do you think I've felt from the time I was a child, knowing that people were saying, 'There's the daughter of a man who will steal the gold from your teeth and the roof from over your head if you don't have six lawyers to watch out for you?' I've heard people saying just that, Dad. When we lived in Jefferson City before we came here everybody hated you and they hated me, and I'm sick of it!" She

[*Turn page*]

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leaned forward. "Dad, why can't you be satisfied to live just like other people, without trying to corral all the money in five counties?"

The hurt expression on his handsome face changed to sadness. "That's exactly what I'm trying to do, Maxine, but we've got to win here. If you'll just be pleasant to Rod Gordon, ask him to dinner, give me a chance to get at the boy, I'll never ask you to do anything of the sort again."

She sat rigid. "No," she said. "No, Dad."

Colonel Ball's face became strained. "Maxine, did you know that Blue Harmon was going to make a showdown issue of this case?"

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Blue Harmon still had the reputation of being—"

Maxine got to her feet. "I know, Dad. Blue was supposed to be fast and accurate with his guns. Even with his fingers swollen up with rheumatism, even with age to slow him down, you expect people to believe that he'd be dangerous to a man who can use his guns like Sheriff Kruse can—and to those two deputies you got him. So you couldn't let Blue make a showdown of it, because you *wanted* that little piece of worthless land and the only roof he had." She started for the door. "I'm going out for a walk."

Colonel Ball colored, clenched his fists, but knew that any show of violence or temper would have no effect on Maxine. A moment later he heard her close the front door as she went out into the soft twilight. . . .

FROM out on the range, Rod Gordon followed the wagon tracks from Blue Harmon's ranch down to the back of Harvey Pratt's furniture store where Pratt had his undertaking parlor.

Sheriff Kruse was just coming out as Rod Gordon started in. The sheriff blocked his way.

"You got special business in there?" he demanded.

Rod felt the heat of anger flushing his face.

"I was Blue Harmon's lawyer," he said, "And he was one of my best friends." To himself he was saying, "Hang onto that temper, Rod. Keep hold of yourself. This gent's trying to rile you."

"What's Blue Harmon got to do with you going in here?" the sheriff asked, eyeing him suspiciously. He seemed curious about what Rod Gordon knew.

Rod had an almost overwhelming impulse to take this arrogant lawman by the slack of his pants and throw him out of the way, guns, star, and all. But a lawyer, he kept telling himself, had to preserve his dignity. He couldn't afford fist fights with the local law.

"I just wanted to know how Blue Harmon was shot," Gordon said, as easily as he could. "That's all right with you, Sheriff?"

"It's not all right," snapped Kruse. "Besides, you haven't answered my question. What's Blue Harmon got to do with your being here?"

Rod Gordon's temper did flare up then. "You know even better than I do," he said hotly, "that you just brought Blue Harmon's body here to the undertaking parlor. So I'm going in to look him over."

Sheriff Kruse didn't move. "You may be a new squirt of an attorney here," he said, "but I'm the law in this county, and if I say you're not going in, you're not going in."

Rod Gordon stepped back, pretending to yield for the moment, but his eyes narrowed, fixed on the sheriff.

"I've been wondering about you as a lawman, Kruse," he said. "I've heard some say you can handle those guns you wear, and I've heard others say you're just a bluff. It took quite a man, in the old days, to handle the sheriff job here. I'd say it would need even a bigger one now. Can you actually handle those irons, or are they just for show to go with that fancy rig-out of yours?"

Crimson flashed into the sheriff's face; anger welled up in his eyes.

"You want proof, pettifogger?" he sneered, and stepped out of the doorway.

He yanked both of his guns in fast time and fired one at a jaybird that came swooping through the back yard. The body of the bird exploded in mid-air. With his other gun he fired almost simultaneously at the weather cock on top of the barn back of the building. The vane spun around like a top. Sheriff Kruse holstered his guns.

"Satisfied?" A smug grin was on his face, which many would have called handsome.

"Plenty," Rod Gordon said, and let go with a right fist that seemed to blow up in the lawman's face.

Kruse staggered back, but as he fell, he grabbed for his guns.

Rod was on him in a flying leap. He caught the man's right hand, with the gun half-drawn, twisted the arm and hurled the gun out of reach. As he went for the left-hand gun it blasted into the evening air. Gordon felt the sting of lead burning along his side, but it didn't slow him as he caught Kruse with his left.

Then Kruse came up with his knees and the blow sent pain coursing through Gordon's whole body.

He hung onto the left-hand gun, however, managed to twist it from the lawman and flung it away also. Then the two were struggling up, and Kruse was cursing steadily.

"You sidewinder!" he yelled. "What's the idea of swinging on me?"

Rod swung at him again, but missed. He stepped back and grinned.

"Well, you did what I wanted you to, anyhow. You proved to me you can call your shots all right, so I know you could have winged old Blue Harmon without killing him—if you hadn't wanted to throw a scare into the county and make an example of the poor old hombre. So I pasted you."

"Why, you—" Kruse came at him as he roared.

Gordon ducked, came up with a left, felt that knee of Kruse's again. So the sheriff was the barroom brawler type! But Rod was out of the way in time and swung with his right. He caught the sheriff as he also ducked.

MEN were running down the street now. Somebody shouted, "Fight!" and the pound of feet quickened.

Rod Gordon had no time to look and see who was coming. He had his hands full with Kruse. Something that felt like a cannon ball caught Rod full in the face and hurled him back, and Kruse was bearing him down with his full weight. A left struck him, and a right, but Rod managed to squirm away as Kruse swarmed over him. Catching the sheriff around the hips and heaving back, he hurled the lawman over his head. He turned and charged as Kruse got up, knocked him down again.

"You didn't have to kill an old man to get him out of his house!" he panted. "You killed him so you wouldn't have an argument with anybody else the bank wanted to dispossess!"

Kruse came at him with desperate fury. His fists sent Gordon covering for a minute, then Rod Gordon came through with a right that was Sunday-go-to-meeting for quality. As Kruse staggered back, Rod yelled:

"You ought to be strung up instead of being allowed to strut around calling yourself the law!"

Sheriff Kruse got to his feet, staggered, and went down again as Rod swung on him. He got up, cowering.

"Enough!" he mumbled, his arms over his face. "But don't think you'll get away with it!"

Rod looked about for the sheriff's guns. There were a dozen spectators now, standing about in a circle. Two men picked up the guns. Rod walked up and took them. They watched with concern while he broke open the weapons and removed the loads. He snapped them shut and tossed them at the sheriff.

"Do you still want to keep me from going in to see Blue Harmon's body?" he drawled.

"You'll pay," Sheriff Kruse muttered. "You'll pay plenty!"

Rod shrugged, turned away from him, and went into the back of the furniture store. He heard a girl's voice behind him:

"Do you know you're dripping blood from a wound in your left side?" she asked. "It's running all over your suit."

As she followed him into the undertaking parlor he looked at her, but he couldn't recall ever having seen her before. She was tall, and creamily tanned, her hair dark, and her eyes were blue. In them now was concern.

"You'd better get to the doctor before you get blood poisoning," she said.

"I haven't the time right now," he said.

"You'd better take the time," she admonished shortly. "At least let me wash it off and see what I can do while you're—" She suddenly stopped, caught her breath sibilantly as she saw Blue Harmon lying on the undertaker's work table.

Harvey Pratt, the undertaker, came in then. He had been outside watching the fight. He was a quiet, shy little man with graying sandy hair that gave him a slightly dusty look, like a miller.

"Rod," he said, "that was a mighty pretty fight, licking the sheriff like you—" He glanced at the girl in the dim evening light and stopped short.

"Go on," she said. "I liked that fight myself. But first, Mr. Pratt, how about some arnica and bandages?" She looked at Rod. "You'll have to take off your shirt and coat so I can get at the wound." She shook her head as he took off his coat. "You certainly made a mess of your suit."

He took off his shirt and turned with his wounded side toward the evening light coming in through a rear window. Neither Rod himself, nor the undertaker, nor the girl spoke as she cleansed the wound and bandaged it.

"It wasn't very deep," she said, as she fastened the bandage securely. "But it certainly bled enough."

"And I'm certainly grateful to you," Rod said. "I'd like to—"

"Don't mention it," she said, and was gone out the back door before he could finish what he had to say.

Rod turned to the undertaker. "Who's that girl?"

"You don't know her?"

"Never saw her before. I've been missing something."

"Colonel Ball's daughter," Pratt said.

"What? And siding against the sheriff? He's the colonel's man, isn't he?"

"Sure. But Maxine Ball's a little strong-minded. Like her father in that, I guess."

Rod turned and looked at the back door that had closed on the girl.

"Well, I'll be dog-gonned," he said, and completely forgot his legal dignity.

V

ROD GORDON and the undertaker were looking at Blue Harmon's body when Waldo Stone, owner and editor of the La Mesa *Independent* came in. Waldo, a soft-spoken, handsome young fellow of about thirty who was always well-dressed in Eastern clothes, had become quite a person of consequence since he had started the *Independent,* the same paper through which Rod Gordon had kept in touch with La Mesa. The paper had, for one thing, helped Rod form his opinion of Colonel Ball as one of the great men of the West. In almost every issue was something about the fine things the colonel was doing for the town.

Waldo had prospered in La Mesa. In the last year he had built a new brick building back of Colonel Ball's bank, and in it was a fine new press.

As he came into the undertaking room now he was dapper in a gray suit, a wing collar and flowing tie. His vest, a lighter gray, was dotted.

He held out his hand to Rod Gordon.

"Good to see you back in town, Rod," he said. "I've been meaning to give you an official greeting from the press in your office, but too busy, so far." He frowned as he took a wad of copy paper and a pencil from his pocket, and looked around. "What's been happening here?"

Harvey Pratt gave him a sharp look. "Mean you hadn't heard Blue Harmon was being dispossessed?"

"Oh, sure," Stone said. "But who

would have believed it would turn out this way."

"I would," said the undertaker. "Anyway, I was afraid it would. . . . But say, Waldo, you missed the best piece of news there's been in La Mesa in a week of new moons. Rod Gordon here just beat the living daylights out of Sheriff Kruse!"

Waldo Stone nodded. "Yes, Maxine was just telling me. Same old hot-headed Rod, eh? I understood you'd taken on considerable dignity in the East, Gordon."

"He looks a heap more natural this way," Harvey Pratt said.

Rod was thinking there seemed to be a possessive note in Waldo Stone's voice as he mentioned Maxine.

"I'll have to watch that temper, I guess, eh, Waldo?" he said.

"Well"—Stone shrugged—"that may save you a lot of trouble and pain. If you ask me, you're starting out a law practice all wrong."

"Maybe so," said Rod. He looked at the corpse on the table. "Harvey, you going to undress him so we can see how he died?"

"I was kind of waiting for Doc Dixon to come and make a coroner's report," Pratt said. "But I suppose I might as well start. You two can help roll him, if you don't mind."

They helped him, but before they had old Blue undressed, Dr. Dixon came in. His first remark was:

"Hey, Rod, I hear you performed a neat operation on that sheriff of ours!"

"Afraid I lost my temper," Rod said, but his voice was grim as he stared at the two bullet-holes in Blue Harmon's great chest. The clotted blood around them was drying.

"Waldo," Doc Dixon said, "that ought to make a good story, eh? 'Fighting mad, young attorney pummels sheriff.' " Doc winked at Harvey Pratt.

Waldo Stone shook his head. "I think the less said about Rod and the sheriff, the better it will be."

Dr. Dixon had turned his attention to business. He was a tall, middle-aged man whose broad shoulders were a little stooped. An effluvia compounded of aromatic medicines, raw whisky, peppermint extract and strong cigar smoke surrounded him as he inspected Blue's body.

"Two slugs through the heart," he reported. "Death instantaneous. Cause of death—'resisting enforcement of the law.' How's that for phrasing, Waldo?" He picked up his bag and stood for a moment more looking down at the corpse. When he spoke again his voice was sober. "Blue was a fine old man," he said. "Of course, he didn't have much longer to live, but"—he glanced at Harvey Pratt—"I reckon we all hate to see him go this way."

"We sure do," Harvey said firmly, and covered old Blue Harmon's body as the doctor left through the furniture store and Rod and Waldo Stone went out the back door.

"Where you living, Rod?" Waldo asked, when they reached the board walk.

"At the Donna Hotel, for the present," Rod said. "As soon as I get settled I'll move to a boarding house."

"They say Mrs. Parish is still setting a good table," Waldo suggested. "And there's a new place. Some woman from out of town has rented the Caldwell house, since the bank took it over, and they say she feeds well."

Just one more place taken over by the bank, Rod was thinking. But he made no comment.

"Drop in at my new place," Waldo invited. "I'd like to show you around."

"Thanks, I will," Rod said.

AS Waldo strode up the street, Rod headed for Homer Helm's lunchroom across the way. He was passing the high loading veranda of the general store when Ike Crandall, the proprietor, called to him from the doorway.

"Rod, got a minute?" It was significant that Ike kept his voice lowered.

"Rod went inside with him. He saw other men at the back of the store in the dim light, standing behind the hanging hams where they would not be noticed clearly. They were silent, grim-faced, watching Rod Gordon approach.

Rod knew all the men, important business men in La Mesa—Hack Midland, the livery stable owner, Rans Speller who ran the Donna Hotel, Sam Redman, the short, powerful blacksmith, Charlie Mann, the saddler, Jim Bolton, the druggist, Owen Bryce who owned the hardware store, Lute Wormer, the barber, and Dave Merrill who ran the mill and feed business, as well as Ike Crandall himself.

Sam Redman had been gesturing as he said something, and his short, thick arms were still outstretched. But it was Jim Colton whose voice Rod first heard.

"Well, you boys figure it out for yourself," the druggist said. "Me, I don't aim to get mixed up in any gun play."

He left the group and headed for the front door. Ike Crandall closed the door behind him. Ike came back, his boots making thudding sounds in the stillness.

Owen Bryce moved out a little from behind a twenty-pound ham. "Rod," he said, "you did fine in that fight with the sheriff. It's what any of us would have wanted to do if we had the nerve."

Rod stood there shaking his head in spite of the low rumble of congratulations.

"I lost my head," he said, "and that doesn't get anybody anywhere."

"It got me a long ways in satisfaction, Rod," Lute Wormer chirped up in his fast-talking way.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to see it," declared Dave Merrill.

"I wish you'd forget it, boys," Rod said. "I'll admit it made me feel good, too, giving the sheriff what he had coming, but I'm telling you we can't win that way."

"I don't know," Bryce protested. "That's what we were talking over."

"You started it and good, Rod," Ike said. "We've been talking about you leading a little night riding committee to see that things get done on the square around here."

Rod still shook his head. "You'll have to get somebody else. I'm starting a law practice and I'm aiming to keep clean of anything lawless."

"You didn't used to be so gol-darned peaceful when you were younger, Rod," the blacksmith said. "The East make a fancy pants out of you, did it?"

"Everybody thinks the East has changed me," Rod said. "It hasn't. I've just grown up and learned that there are laws to abide by and that that's the only way to do things."

Charlie Mann's steady, soft eyes were on Rod as he asked: "You think we should stand for what the bank does to folks that got all they can do to struggle along and keep living?"

"The bank's within its legal rights unless we can find out they've been cheating," Rod said. "You start a war, and there'll be a lot of people killed, and you still might lose out."

"That don't sound like you, Rod Gordon," Ike Crandall said angrily. "Reckon old Blue was right, being scared you'd gone too soft to do this town any good."

"Rod ain't gone soft," Owen Bryce said stroking his chin whiskers with an eight-penny nail from his hardware stock. "Rod proved he ain't soft, taking on the sheriff and beating him. But you did come back with some right queer ideas, Rod."

"They're things I had to learn, I tell you!" Rod said, a little desperation in his voice. "We've just got to keep a sharper watch on our business dealings, that's all."

"You think maybe we should come to you," Lute Wormer snapped, "every time we want to do some business with something Colonel Ball owns? Well, I don't care if you do rent space over my shop, I'll say it's the devil of a note when a young lawyer gets to figurin' everybody should come asking his advice when we was all here before—"

"Shut up your flapping mouth!" Rod barked. "All I said was we've got to watch out in doing business from now. La Mesa's growing and it's going to be a lot bigger, with a lot more people here than we ever dreamed of, with this railroad making the town grow. In any big town you'd have to watch your business dealings, read what you sign, save your receipts. If you go to the bank to borrow money, sign a demand note, make up your mind you sure have to pay it all any minute the banker asks you for it or lose your collateral."

DAVE MERRILL nodded. "Rod's right. We've all been doin' business too slipshod. Why, in all the notes I've taken and loans I've made in the feed and grain business I don't reckon more than two out of five ever reads what he's signing."

"What about them that's already up to their necks in debt to the bank?" Ike Crandall demanded. "There's a heap more in that boat than there is on the dry land. Ain't many of us hereabouts that don't owe Colonel Ball and his bank or his lumber mill or somethin' else he owns."

"You don't have to bank in La Mesa," Rod said. "Go over to Wild Horse and do business at the Stockman's Bank there. They have to loan money to make money."

"Rod," Ike said patiently, "I reckon you ain't heard that Colonel Ball bought out that little Stockman's Bank over at Wild Horse about a month ago."

"What about the little bank at Silver River?" Rod asked. "I know that's a day's ride each way, but it might pay you in the long run. It's better than—"

Ike was shaking his head. "Closed up," he said.

"You mean that holdup six months ago closed it up?" Rod said. "I read about the holdup in the *Independent* but I figured the bank would be covered with insurance."

"Didn't have a dime's worth in insurance," Merrill said.

There was silence and all eyes were fixed on Rod.

"Well," he said, "at least on next election day we can put in a humane law enforcement bunch and a county clerk we know is honest."

"Election day is over a year away," Merrill reminded. "Colonel Ball and the organization he's built up can have the county grabbed by then, and he'll be working on the railroad people as they come pouring in with the tracks. The rest of us won't have a chance to conduct honest business—or any other kind."

"I'll tell you one thing!" Lute Wormer said, his face flushed with excitement, "I'll shoot down the first barber that Colonel Ball gets in here to run competition to my shop!"

"Well, now," Ike Crandall said, "I don't reckon we can go that far. But somethin's got to be done. We ain't letting the bank get away with anything more like they did with Blue Harmon—dispossessin' him—and killin' him to boot."

Rod hitched the bandage that Maxine Ball had bound tightly about his chest.

"If you'll excuse me now, boys," he said, "I'm going over to the lunchroom and get something to eat."

"Anyhow," the blacksmith called, "we sure thank you for licking the sheriff."

"It was a pleasure," Rod said, and went outside.

VI

IT WAS twilight. Now that it was cooler, there was more movement about Main Street. Rod spoke to citizens he knew, eyed passing Easterners wearing derbies or narrow-brimmed slouch hats. The heat of the day was tough on them. It was taking Rod considerable time to get used to it again himself.

From the south end of Main Street came sounds of rasping saws, pounding hammers and the scream of the buzz rig at the big new mill. Down there men were working two twelve-hour shifts to have everything ready when the single track of the new railroad, now only eleven miles east of town, reached its terminus.

Some of the building sounds came from the work on the new station at the foot of Main Street, but most of the construction was being done for Colonel Ball. He was building acres of cattle pens and two loading chutes built along the railroad, erecting places of business along newly laid out Railroad Street. He was building the biggest drink and pleasure emporium in miles. It would be known as the Oasis, with a bar over a hundred feet long in the saloon and a ballroom as large as the famed old Cotillion Hall that had recently burned in Kansas City.

Already two small saloons were doing business at the end of Railroad Street and most of the men on Main Street now seemed to be headed that way, clumping in high-heeled cowboy boots, farm boots, or brogues brought from the Old Country. Some rode horseback, some drove buckboards.

The women were out along Main Street doing the week's buying, or exchanging the news of the town and range on the broad porches of the feed store or the general store. Soon buckboards or farm wagons would be carrying them homeward in the cool of the evening.

Rod Gordon liked the feeling of being in the midst of this hum of progress. He felt important, too, as he glanced down the street at the front window of his office and the lettering there that had just been finished yesterday.

J. RODERICK GORDON
ATTORNEY AT LAW

He had been named John for his father, and the Roderick came from some grandparent back in Scotland. As a child he had been called "Rod" because everybody called his father "John." He liked the looks of J. Roderick. It looked—and sounded—distinguished.

He glowed with the warmth of anticipating success within his grasp. It was going to be fine to grow big with the town.

Up at one end of Main Street a mule-skinner was bellowing at his six beasts. He cracked his looping lap line over the heads of the leaders and called his mules names not their own.

In the freight wagon the skinner drove, men stood with heads and broad shoulders showing above the high board sides. One of them began singing in a high Irish tenor voice. The others joined in with a brogue fresh out of Old Ireland.

Drill, ye tarriers, drill
Oh, drill ye tarriers drill
For ye work all day without sugar in your tay
Stand in the middle and blaze away.
Drill ye tarriers, drill
And drill—and drill—and work

When they reached where Rod Gordon was standing he hummed along with the railroader's famous song. Small boys ran alongside the wagon, eyes sparkling. Workers on the railroad were heroes in their eyes.

Two women paused behind Rod to watch and talk. He noticed the sharp New England twang in their voices, saying what a shame it was that foreigners were allowed to come over and be such boisterous examples for young America.

ANOTHER high-sided freight wagon came down Main Street and a leather-lunged, red-haired son was bellowing an Irish ditty, holding his hands cupped like the flare of a trumpet. The other men crowded in the wagon were trying to jig to his tune.

"And by midnight," one of the women said, "they'll be so drunk and roaring a body can't sleep."

Rod turned and touched his hat. "Maybe anyone who works like they do laying hot track in the broiling sun all day deserves to go a little crazy once a week."

The women glared at him, snorted, and moved on.

Rod crossed the street toward Homer Helm's lunchroom.

"I wish Dad could have lived to see me getting my teeth into this," he thought, then sighed a little, remembering how his father had deprived himself so his son could be a lawyer.

"But you *are* a lawyer now," he told himself, "so you've got to cut out losing your temper. You have no use for fists or guns any more. Only your head and your knowledge of the law."

He opened the door to the lunchroom and went inside. . . .

In the meantime, up at Colonel Ball's big house, the bank president who had been too restless and uneasy to eat his evening meal jumped from his chair and half-ran to the door when he heard footsteps on the porch. He opened it and relaxed. Maxine was there.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "Decide to come back and eat something? You didn't finish your supper."

"Something gave me an appetite," she said, coming in.

"Good," he said absently. "Have you seen Sheriff Kruse?"

"I have, and I imagine he'll be along as soon as he gets his face patched up."

"Face patched up? What are you talking about?" He caught her arm. "Look here. Nothing's happened to him over the Harmon affair, has it?"

"It has, but you needn't keep the door locked. If anybody gets the blame for Harmon's death it won't be you."

"I'm not locking doors," he said savagely. "This one must have got locked by mistake. What happened to Kruse?"

"Your sheriff tried to keep the new lawyer from going in the undertaking room to look at Blue Harmon, so the lawyer beat up your sheriff."

"Now, wait a minute—" Colonel Ball protested.

"Unarmed," she said, "this Gordon man beat your armed sheriff all over the place. Kruse even drew against Gordon and grazed him. I dressed his wound after the fight."

"Let me get this straight," Ball said. "You say—"

She went into the kitchen and he followed her. While she got something to eat, she gave him more details. When she had finished, Colonel Ball took a deep breath.

"Good," he said. "Kruse has been getting too cocky lately. This should keep him in his place." He walked to the end of the kitchen and back. "How did folks take the fight?"

"Everybody thinks it's wonderful."

"Now don't you see how important it is that we get this Rod Gordon to see things our way?" her father demanded.

"No," she said. "I told you I wasn't going to have anything to do with it."

"Don't be foolish! Look what a start you've got dressing the bullet creases in his side. That's fine!"

There were heavy boot treads on the porch and as her father started toward the door, she turned toward the stairs.

"I'm going to bed, Dad," she said. "If I'm not at breakfast with you in the morning you'll know I've gone for an early ride."

"All right," the colonel said, preoccupied with his thoughts.

He opened the door, looked at Sheriff Kruse outside and motioned him in.

"Well, Sheriff! I hear you got a little too officious with La Mesa's new attorney."

"I'll get even," Kruse growled.

"No," Colonel Ball said. "Not the way you figure, not on my time. Not unless I give you the word."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're going to square up with Gordon right soon. You owe that young man an apology. You had no right to keep him out of the undertaking room."

"Cussed pettifogger was snooping around, and I wasn't sure how the bullet-holes would look under careful examination so soon after the shooting. I'd have stalled him all night if he hadn't swung that one on me by surprise."

"It doesn't matter," Colonel Ball said. "Not the way we'll work things from now on. I mean to get you two together as soon as I can make arrangements with Gordon. You'll apologize for trying to keep him out of the undertaker's. You'll say—" He tipped his head back and stroked his chin. "You'll say that you were wrought up over having to kill the old man and were jumpy when Gordon came barging up to the door."

SHERIFF KRUSE opened his mouth to object but his jaw gave him pain. Before he could get out a word, the colonel was going on:

"You set fire to the Harmon house all right?"

Kruse nodded, stopped with a pained expression. His head hurt.

"There wasn't anybody in sight," he growled. "I sent Deputy Bowie riding the ridge to watch until sundown. He'll know if anybody came near the place after we left with Harmon's body." The sheriff glanced at the clock, then at the gathering darkness outside. "Bowie ought to be along soon. I left word at the office I'd be here."

Ball got up and paced the floor. "Too bad we had to be so sure of getting Harmon, but he had too good a reputation with his guns, old as he was."

"He came near getting me at that," Kruse said, in self-defense.

There was a knock at the window and Idaho Vance, the bank guard, looked in with his fish eyes.

"You wouldn't mind if I got myself some beer for the hot night?" Idaho called.

"No," Ball said. "Go to the kitchen and get some out of the cooler. And stay around—either in your room or in the kitchen. I might need you."

The little man disappeared from the open window and in a moment or so they heard him in the kitchen.

"I could use a bottle of beer myself," Sheriff Kruse said.

"Go get it—bring me one, too," Ball said. He kept pacing the floor, puffing on his cigar, his hands behind his back. The sound of a single-footing horse reached him through the open windows and he went to the front door. A man was dismounting in the drive beside the house.

"That you, Bowie?" Colonel Ball asked in a low voice.

"Yeah," the man said. He clumped up on the porch. "Where's the sheriff?"

Bowie was a massive bulk in the dusk. He had a full black beard and huge round shoulders.

"What'd you find out?" Colonel Ball asked him.

"Not much." Bowie paused. "They said Kruse was over here."

Colonel Ball motioned him inside, just as Kruse came to the living room with two bottles of beer in his hands. He asked Bowie a wordless question in his eyes.

"You know that crazy hombre?" the deputy said. "Lives up in a shack on the mesa."

Sheriff Kruse stood motionless with the beer bottles in his hands. "What about him?"

"I think he saw what happened," Bowie said.

Kruse glanced at the colonel.

"I thought you made sure nobody was watching, Kruse," said Ball.

"We scouted the whole area," Kruse said. He put the beer bottle down on a stand and gestured with his big hands. "I figured there might be some folks come out from town to see what was goin' to come off, after Blue tellin' everybody he was goin' to make a showdown of bein' dispossessed, so we didn't wait for anybody to show up—went out and did the job a little early."

"You planned that part of it well enough," Colonel Ball growled. "But what about this crazy little man, what is it you say they call him?"

Idaho came in from the kitchen with an open beer bottle in one hand and a chicken leg in the other. He answered his boss.

"Loony, they call him, Colonel—Loony Tate."

"All right, this Loony Tate," Ball snapped. "What about him, Bowie?"

Bowie eyed the beer and shook his head. "That looks mighty cold and good," he hinted.

"Idaho," Ball barked, "get Bowie a bottle of beer."

The little man with the fish eyes and the bank guard uniform went back to the kitchen.

"Well, Bowie?" the colonel said.

"Well, I was riding the ridge and I seen the wagon with Sheriff Kruse and Deputy Downs go down the valley toward La Mesa out of sight. I kept back mostly so I could look over the ridge and not be seen, but when I didn't see nobody I come up where I could get a better view and—"

IDAHO came in with the bottle of beer and Bowie took down half of it in one swift pass. He licked his lips, said, "Ah," wiped his beard and mustache on the back of his hand.

"Well, just then I seen this dude lawyer named Gordon riding a spent horse toward the burning house, comin' from town. He gets off and runs to the house and looks around. Sees the tracks of the wagon and I reckon he must have followed the blood traces to where we put Harmon on the wagon."

"What's all this got to do with Loony Tate?" Ball roared.

"This dude walked around and started wandering toward the barn and corral, like something was drawing him." Bowie turned to the sheriff. "Recollect how that crazy little hombre plays a mouth harp sometimes, sitting on the feed store porch?"

Sheriff Kruse nodded.

"He must have been playing that thing and this dude heard him. Then I seen this Loony settin' back of the barn waitin' for the dude to find him. When he did they talked a while, then Loony Tate starts walkin' off towards a grove of alders along the edge of the rim rise, and the dude, he got his horse and mounted and rode along, trailing the wagon tracks to town."

"That's how he come to be at the back door of the undertaker's," Kruse said. "I was kind of wondering."

"What difference does it make?" Colonel Ball demanded. "Now—how much of the dispossess business did this Loony see?"

Kruse reached for his bottle of beer, drained half the bottle and put the bottle down on the table.

"Well?" Ball said.

Kruse held out his hands in a desperate, empty gesture. "How in thunder do I know? I didn't figure on dealin' with some crazy galoot!"

VII

COLONEL BALL sat down, mumbling something as if trying to figure out the answer to a puzzling question.

"I don't suppose you got any idea, Bowie, what this Loony Tate said to the dude?" Kruse said in a hopeless tone.

Bowie shook his head. "Any more of them chicken legs left, Idaho?"

[*Turn page*]

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"No more legs," Idaho said. "But there's some wings."

"Stop acting like a hog and pay attention," Kruse snapped. "The boss wants to find out some things."

"What did Loony do after he went in the alders?" Ball asked. "Did you trail him?"

"I figured I'd better come back and tell the sheriff, so I did," Bowie said. "Now can I have them chicken wings? I'm hungry."

Colonel Ball nodded to Idaho. "Go get him those wings."

"What you figure to do, Colonel?" asked Sheriff Kruse.

Ball didn't answer. He got up again, walked into the other room and when he returned he was puffing a freshly lit cigar.

"What we've got to decide," he declared, "is whether Gordon knew what happened at Harmon's after he left Loony Tate."

Everybody put on a thinking expression except big, bearded Bowie. He tore into the chicken wings that Idaho had brought in on a platter.

Sheriff Kruse began shaking his head. "I wouldn't know," he said. "Unless Gordon did know, and that was the real reason he took a swing at me. Before he did that he started taunting me about my guns, trying to make out I didn't know how to use them. So I blasted a jaybird all to feathers and spun the weather cock on the barn for him. Then he swung on me when I wasn't ready and he kept on shouting he was taking a sock at me because I could shoot good enough to wing Blue Harmon without killing him, if I'd wanted to."

"You fool!" Colonel Ball said. "How did you get stupid enough to fall for that trick?"

Kruse reddened. "Now, look, Colonel," he said in a half-pleading, half angry voice. "I'm only telling you this to help you."

Colonel Ball stomped to the end of the room and back. He stood facing Kruse, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"All right," he said. "You made a mistake. But I guess we can be sure Gordon doesn't actually know what happened to Blue Harmon."

"That's what I'm trying to say," Kruse said.

Ball drew on his cigar, then chewed on it viciously. He turned on Bowie finishing the chicken. "You, Bowie. You think Loony Tate saw what happened?"

Bowie shrugged his great round shoulders. "He must have, far as I can see. He was in the right spot to see plenty, all right, and for all I know the locoed little buzzard might have been settin' back of the barn playing his mouth harp since last Fourth of July."

"And he likely was watching what went on, from cover," the colonel concluded.

He went to the stairs, mounted them, made sure the door was closed so Maxine would be unlikely to hear the low voices. When he returned he glanced at Kruse who nodded his big, handsome head.

"That's the way it looks to me," he commented.

Bowie dug at a section of the chicken with a finger nail and made no reply. Idaho just planted his fish-pale eyes on the colonel without expression.

"Then we can assume that Loony Tate saw what went on," Colonel Ball said, "but for some reason he hasn't told Gordon yet."

"That's the way I figure it," Kruse agreed again.

Idaho took a quick swig of his beer. "You figure we should go up and make sure he don't tell nobody, Colonel?"

COLONEL BALL was considering. Bowie was taking interest again. "That cabin of his'd make a mighty pretty fire," he said ruminatingly.

Ball shook his head. "One fire's enough for awhile. Whatever you boys do, don't set fire to his shack." He lowered his voice. "And be sure you make this one look like an accident."

Idaho licked the foam off his lips. "Sure," he said. "A man ain't always certain if it's a deer or what he's aiming at moving through the woods."

Bowie frowned. "How you going to get him in the woods?"

"We go up and rout him out the bunk and take him walking in the moonlight," Idaho said.

The colonel nodded slowly. "I think that's the answer, Idaho. And I believe tonight is the best time."

"Sure," Bowie said. "If he did see us dispossessin' Harmon you wouldn't want him to have more time to talk than—"

"Good," Colonel Ball said. "Make it a hunting accident, as Idaho suggested. By the time the buzzards find him, nobody will know how long it's been."

LOONY TATE chuckled softly as he reached the alder grove at the base of the mesa and started up the slope by his own worn path.

"Eddication maybe put fancy pants on Rod Gordon," he mumbled, "but it don't make him fool Loony Tate into telling what he knows. Ain't nobody going to make me tell, neither."

He twanged his mouth harp and the mellow strains of an old river boat shuffle tune came lilting out. Rod Gordon had been wrong about him knowing only "The Dying Cowboy." He had learned another tune. He began marching to it up the trail.

Abruptly he stopped playing, shook his head, and his queer pushed-up face looked grave.

"Only thing," he thought uneasily, "I sure hope Rod Gordon don't go telling around town that I seen what went on." His little eyes widened. "Hey, that would be mighty bad! Hey, that'd be just as bad, almost, as if I'd *told* him what I seen. The sheriff and them deputies would come up gunnin' me down to shut up my big mouth tight."

A jaybird swooped at him as he broke from the grove and Loony put his hand in his pocket by force of habit, took a split pea and tossed it into the air. The jaybird dived for it, picked it out of the air and went off on a juniper limb to gulp it down.

"Yes, sir, that'd be mighty bad," Loony muttered. "And now I figure it out, I don't reckon I fooled Rod Gordon none, either, telling him I couldn't of seen what went on when I was settin' back of the barn. He'd know I wouldn't be settin' there while shootin' was goin' on. He'd know, sure enough, I'd be peekin' to see."

His face flushed. The jaybird came at him again and he tossed up another split pea.

"You little locoed fool varmint, Loony Tate," he said angrily. "You won't never learn to stop showin' how important you can be. You done it to let Rod Gordon know you was there where you could see. You figured to get him coaxing you, and now look at the fix you're in. If he tells he found me around the burning place and I seen—"

Loony's feet moved faster up the trail.

He came up to the cabin the back way where he could be screened if anyone were watching for him already. The blue jay that had followed him made a last dive over his head, skimmed Loony's battered hat with one claw and zoomed up again, giving it up for now.

He went into the cabin and got out some hard biscuits and wild honey. Taking down a hunk of jerked meat he dipped water out of the wooden bucket.

There were low squeaking sounds in the log chinks as he sat down to eat, then a half-dozen brown-backed, white-bellied field mice came out of the cracks and crouched at the far edge of the table.

"You stay there and learn your manners till I get through eatin'," Loony scolded. "Then it'll be your turn."

It was growing dark in the cabin, so he lighted a candle in a bottle and stood it beside him. He grinned at the mice waiting there at a respectful distance. There were big mice and small ones. A little one darted out for him quickly and Loony brushed him back.

"You don't learn nothing, Squeaky," he said. "I'll have to trade you for a blade of bunch grass pretty soon if you don't behave." He looked at the oldest mouse, the one with the thick whiskers. "Can't you make him learn to behave, General Grant?"

General Grant stood on his hind legs and washed his face. "Or you, George Washington?" Loony said to a big mouse with a particularly long nose. "Can't you help learn Squeaky?"

He finished eating and pushed back his plate.

"Sorry there ain't nothing hot for you tonight. But I didn't figure to start a fire and let folks know we was home. Might have company tonight—or tomorrow night. You finish them eats and let me know if you hear folks coming."

The mice ran up to his plate and began eating the crumbs.

Loony moved the candle bottle to a soap-box table and took down one of five well-thumbed books from the shelf. He sat down on a straight-backed chair and began laboriously to read "THE HISTORY OF THE GREAT WAR BETWEEN THE STATES."

He read until the candle burned low in the bottle neck, then suddenly he came up alert. As if blown by a flash breeze, the mice had left him. There was not a sound of them nor a sign.

Loony rose without a sound, reached for his six-shooter and buckled the belt about his waist.

"So Rod Gordon did tell," he thought. "Maybe he's working for this colonel that owns the bank and everything."

Then from outside came his first definite sound of warning. A man's hard heel had struck a rock. There were nails in the heel and they made a sharp click against the stone.

The brain of Loony Tate, schooled in the way of animal self-preservation, told him that the wearer of the boot was perhaps a hundred feet away still.

He stood perfectly still, heard the slight rumble of a growling low voice. His mind flashed back to the scene of the afternoon at Blue Harmon's. There had been three men there. He wondered if there were three men after him now. In that case one might be at the back of the cabin. The man had circled the Harmon place first to make sure nobody was watching, and he had laid flat in a thicket until they had finished their inspection.

He bent, lifted a wide floor board before the stove, and slipped under it, letting it down over his head. He was headed toward the back of the place, and he began to crawl silently.

When he reached a break in the old stone foundation he peered out into the night. There was no sign of movement at the back of the cabin. But on the other side, he could hear soft footsteps. They stopped and there was a low rumble of voices.

He crawled out, kept flat, and moved off toward the brush and grass behind the shack. There he rose up in a clump of rabbit bush and watched.

There was pounding on the other side of the shack, then silence.

Loony moved around toward the end of the cabin, keeping well in the brush. He could see the men now, just two of them, standing crouched in the starlight before the door. The little one was pounding on the door with the butt of his six-shooter.

"Open up in there!" the big one bellowed. "We want to talk to you."

They waited for a reply, got only silence.

"There's a light inside," the little man said: "Maybe he's playing possum."

The big man put his shoulder to the door and pushed without trying the latch. With a tearing sound, the door burst in. Light sprayed out over the men and Loony could see them clearly.

"Idaho Vance and that bearded deputy of Sheriff Kruse's," he said.

HE noted how they were armed. Didn't like the looks of it. It reminded him too much of the men who had been at Blue Harmon's place that afternoon.

They went inside and out of his view. He crouched there in the warmth of evening, shivering a little as if it were cool.

"Wait till I get to town and face Rod Gordon for telling about me!" he thought angrily. "You reckon he's siding that colonel?"

As the two came outside Idaho was saying:

"We'll just have to tell him when he comes to town again. Too bad, too, coming away up here to tell Loony the colonel's got an important job for him."

Loony stiffened. He thought, "What they come up at night to tell me for?" He crouched lower and kept thinking hard.

"Yeah," the bearded deputy said, "Loony'd be mighty sorry to miss out on the job."

"Too bad we can't tell him the colonel wants him to start first thing in the morning," Idaho said.

Loony rose from the brush. He took breath to say, "Here I am. What's the colonel want me for?" Then he paused as instinct held him back.

"Might as well be getting back," Idaho said. "Have to get that other feller to drive the colonel's new carriage. A shame, too. Loony'd look mighty important sitting in front there behind the colonel's white-stockinged, bank-tailed hackneys and with Miss Maxine settin' in the back of the victoria."

Loony almost let out a cry then. The colonel's daughter had been kind to him. She had ridden up past his cabin twice, and paused to talk to him the last time. He would sure like to be her driver. He took a step half out of the brush, again took breath to call, again stopped himself. His sense of self-preservation held him back. Besides, he wasn't sure he wanted to work for a crook like folks said the colonel was.

He felt a little sad as he watched the two men start toward the down trail. Slipping along as quietly as a mountain cat, Loony trailed them. He saw them mount their horses down the trail and ride down the mountain.

He came back shaking his head. "Maybe I should have told 'em I was here. Maybe—" He kept shaking his head, saying, "No. No, sir. I dasn't take the chance."

VIII

LOONY went in his cabin, closed the door, began to repair the broken latch the big deputy had broken in forcing the door. He got that fixed and thought about going to bed, but the new job bothered him.

"I might get a couple of winks," he decided, "then go down and be there at the colonel's house sunup time and tell him I—"

He froze at a sound outside the cabin. His hand dropped near his single gun but not soon enough. The door burst open in his face and two rifles stabbed at him.

The dead-fish eyes of Idaho were on him. The little gunman's voice was low and flat. "Come on outside, Loony. We figured you'd be around."

"Yeah," Bowie said, "we want to talk to you about that job of drivin' for the colonel." The big man boomed out a laugh that shook the cabin.

"Outside and start walking," Idaho said. He picked Loony's gun from his holster as he passed.

Now that he was in a tight, Loony Tate stopped trembling. He became calm and took his time. He thought, "A man don't have long to live at best. When he's got maybe three minutes he stretches 'em as long as he can."

He thought of running but that was silly, with two rifles at his back. How could a pair of experienced gun hands miss him?

"You walking me down to town to talk about that job?"

"Yeah. We're—"

"Shut up," Idaho said. "No need to fool him any longer, Bowie. We walk him out and get it done."

"Make it look like a hunting accident," Bowie reminded him.

"I heard what the man said," Idaho told him.

Loony walked slowly off in the night, with the two behind him. He looked off across the grass and brush that lay silver-gray in the starlight and knew there wasn't a chance to break for it. A poor shot could hit a man at fifty feet in that much light.

The boots behind him scuffed on stone and hard pieces of adobe. They struck rocks or rustled leaves. But they kept the same three paces behind him.

He began heading for the rim of the mesa. There was one point where a landslide had graduated the cliff drop so a man who jumped might get out alive. The idea wasn't good, but it was all he could think of.

"He's heading for the mesa rim," Bowie warned. "He might jump."

"Let him jump," Idaho said. "Anybody might think he was shot by accident from below or above."

So they were going to drop him at the rim.

Loony made up his mind he'd jump before he got to the rim.

Suddenly, another idea worked its way into his brain. There was a crack in the edge of the rimrock that came back into the tableland just to the left. It dropped down maybe ten feet into a tiny canyon, then the canyon turned sharp right and became wider.

There wasn't much chance that anybody knew about that but him. He had chased a rattlesnake into the niche one time, had found it when he had practically fallen on the snake through the brush that covered the head of the small canyon.

The canyon head was just before him now. Any minute the bottom of tableland would drop away and he'd go crashing down into the brush. It would come as a surprise even to him.

He began treading the earth harder with every step, so that the false step would take him down and away from those guns as quickly as possible.

"We're getting pretty close to the rim," Bowie said. "He might break for it any time now, Idaho."

"Let him break," Idaho said, and in his voice were the tones of a killer.

Loony was feeling desperately for the deadfall but couldn't find it. Was he wrong in his direction? He was certainly entering a thicket that looked like the right place.

"What's the idea pickin' all this brush to go through?" Bowie said.

"Turn out of it, Loony," Idaho said. "You hear? Turn out of the brush or I'll drill you."

"Sure," Loony said. "Sure."

PANIC had him. He was shaking, because there wasn't more than another second he could stall and there was no sign of the drop he had expected.

He took one more step, heard Idaho say, "All right, you crazy galoot."

Everything seemed to happen at once. There was a rifle blast behind him. But just before that the earth dropped away under his feet. He felt the brush tear at him as he fell into the canyon head, heard the cursing of the men above.

"Where'd he fall?" Bowie demanded. "I seen him drop."

"He didn't drop from my shot," Idaho said.

The two were thrashing about in the brush above. Any second they might come crashing down on top of Loony. He began crawling along the canyon floor. Down there were only the thick trunks of the bushes to tread past, but above the tops were thick and tangled.

Another shot cracked and another. They were making so much noise they couldn't hear what little rustling sound Loony was making in his escape.

"Wait till I get that squealing Rod Gordon!" he kept thinking, over and over.

Then he broke and headed for the wild country, and as he ran, his animal cunning picked the quiet places for his flying feet.

The shouting and the thrashing about finally died away behind him. But Loony Tate kept running and cursing Rod Gordon.

"Wait 'til I get you, Rod!" he sobbed. "You just wait. . . ."

On Monday morning when Rod Gordon came from the hotel, Arch Whitman, the Kimble Gulch rancher, was waiting at the steps to his office.

"Rod," he said, "I—me and my wife, we been thinking about the money I borrowed from the bank. We've decided—"

There were loungers within earshot. Rod took Arch by the arm and started him up the long outside staircase.

"Let's wait till we get to the office, then we can talk without being interrupted."

Rod showed the rancher to a chair

when they got to the office, and sat down at his desk.

"Now, let's start again, Arch. You and your wife have been talking about the loan you made at the bank."

"You see," said Arch, "we figure it this way. While our ranch don't seem to mean much right now, still there's some water rights at the lower end. Now if Colonel Ball wanted to expand his loading sheds he'd need that water, and Bess and I figured out maybe that's why it was made so easy for us to borrow that money—on a demand note and mortgage I signed."

"Sounds possible," Rod admitted. "What do you want to do about it, Arch?"

"Pay the danged thing off and get back the papers I signed."

"You can get along without the money?"

"We can manage. But what you said got me thinking. And I ain't slept much. Fact, I been down at the bottom of your stairs waiting for you since six o'clock."

"What do you want me to do for you, Arch?"

"Bess and me, we want you to go to the bank and pay the man for us," Whitman said.

"You don't have to have a lawyer to take up your loan at a bank, Arch," Rod told him.

"Maybe not," the rancher said. "But Bess figured it would be better. That colonel could talk a range bronc into harness if he figured it was worth his while. And I feel kind of silly going back to him, asking for my papers back, tellin' him I changed my mind, not even saying why."

"All right," Rod said. "You want to give me a check for the amount or what?"

Arch held out his bank book. "I'll sign a blank check and you can make it out when you find out how much he'll charge for the interest."

Rod shook his head. "I'm taking nobody's blank check. Now you're acting foolish again, Arch. You make out a check for the amount you borrowed and I'll see if I can talk the colonel out of the interest."

HALF an hour later Rod Gordon walked up the board walk. The bank was just opening for the day as he got there. He saw the colonel's new carriage coming down Main Street from his house. It was a long double-seated victoria with seats for two, front and rear, facing each other like the seats of a stage-coach. But the victoria had a calash top that could be raised to protect those sitting in the rear seat.

Ah Sing, the colonel's Chinese cook, driver, and general handyman, sat on the box up front and drove the white-stockinged hackneys.

The colonel sat back luxurious and grand, smoking his morning cigar, and across from him, riding backward, sat Idaho Vance, wearing his bank guard's uniform, the coat brushed back on either side out of the way of the twin guns.

It was a grand sight to see the glistening black vehicle come down the street and draw up before the bank.

Colonel Ball smiled pleasantly, lifting his cigar and waved to Rod Gordon.

"Good morning, Gordon," he greeted. "I was just thinking of you." He spoke to the driver. "Wait for me, Ah Sing."

Idaho got out of the vehicle first and held the door for the colonel. Ball came out with his right hand extended. He shook hands with Gordon.

"Good to see you this morning," he said. "I hear you gave the sheriff a handy licking last evening, Gordon."

Rod Gordon cleared his throat. There were at least a dozen people within earshot of their voices and he wanted to apologize for letting his temper explode. He didn't want the colonel to think of him as an ordinary brawler. But Colonel Ball seemed so pleased that Gordon hesitated.

"I was glad to hear about it," Ball said. "Sheriff Kruse took too much liberty in that matter with Harmon. There was absolutely no excuse for that. I feel very badly about it."

"It was pretty tough on the old man," Rod said.

Colonel Ball lowered his voice a little. "It'll be a good lesson to Kruse." He motioned to the bank entrance. "Shall we go in, Mr. Gordon? I want to talk to you."

He ushered Rod inside, motioned him to a chair beside his desk. Rod sat down feeling a little baffled. The colonel looked over some papers, then he settled back and beamed upon the attorney.

Rod got in a word first.

"I came up to see you this morning about the loan that Arch Whitman made," he said. "It seems Arch and his wife have changed their minds. They'd like to pay off the loan today and take back their papers."

For the briefest instant a shadow which might have been anger flashed over the colonel's face, then he tipped back his head and laughed.

"Of course, Mr. Gordon," he said expansively. "But they could have done it themselves. They didn't have to hire an attorney."

"That's what I told them. But Arch said he felt a little silly about it. I have his check here for the amount of his loan. If you'll get the papers, Colonel, we'll get that matter settled."

"Of course, of course," Ball said. "Excuse me." He rose and went to the big vault at the back of the caged area.

Rod followed him with his eyes. The great door was open. There were drawers on either side and at the back there were stacks of bound papers and books. The colonel opened one of the drawers, ran through some papers and brought three back with him.

"There we are," he said. "Look them over, Mr. Gordon. I think you'll find them all in order."

Rod looked over the bond, the mortgage, the note that accompanied the bond and mortgage. He nodded. "Everything's here, sir. If you'll tell me how much interest is to be added."

"Interest for a few days?" Colonel Ball said. He laughed. "Let's not be ridiculous." He took the check Rod held out. "Just right," he said. "Now about this little talk I wanted to have with you, Mr. Gordon."

Rod waited, rather tensely on guard.

"I have a great deal of legal business to be handled," Ball said. "Judge Anders can't take care of all of it. Besides, there are strangers coming into town every day, buying property from me, and they need an attorney to look after their side of the transaction."

"I'm aware of that," Rod Gordon said solemnly.

THE colonel smiled, opened his hands like smooth widening gates before him. "It's yours for the asking, Gordon."

"Thank you, sir." He had things to say but wanted to hear all the colonel had to say.

"I was considering another matter," Ball said. "As one of our coming citizens of La Mesa, I feel that you should have a part in the official welcoming of the railroad to town. An important part, Gordon."

Rod didn't speak. But his heart was pounding a little faster. He was trying to see the colonel as an honest man, after all. He was trying to see his way clear to become successful in the colonel's shadow.

"I want you to make the introduction at the affair two weeks from Saturday," Colonel Ball said. "It's just what a young lawyer needs to give him prestige in a growing town."

Rod knew that. He had been hoping for some such break.

"Thank you, sir," he murmured. "I'd be delighted."

But Colonel Ball suddenly had leaped from his chair and was tapping on the window. He motioned to his daughter who was riding past, side-saddle, on a beautiful chestnut mare.

She hesitated, frowned. Then she reined her mare to the rack and got down lightly, her long riding skirts making a fine swish, with a display of white petticoat underneath.

Colonel Ball had Rod by the arm, moving him toward the door. As his daughter came in the bank, the colonel said:

"Maxine, we were just about to ride down to look over the placing of the speaker's platform for the railroad celebration. Won't you join us?"

Rod wasn't sure, but he thought the colonel gripped his daughter's arm with considerable pressure. She said, "Why, yes," rather stiffly, and the colonel said:

"Of course you know Rod Gordon, Maxine."

IX

OUTSIDE the bank, Rod Gordon got in the victoria with the colonel and Maxine. She sat stiffly, facing them, without showing much sign of pleasure. It was, Rod felt, something for her to endure; nothing more.

They rode down Main Street with people staring and the colonel bowing and tipping his hat. And Rod felt a little proud in spite of the way some of the old residents stared at him with the colonel. He also smiled and bowed to friends, but he got cold glances in return.

Down at the end of Main Street, the colonel pointed out the site for the speaker's stand and the pens that would be used for the cattle and wild horses for the rodeo that would be part of the three-day celebration.

"Mr. Gordon's going to make the introductory speech, Maxine," he said.

"Really?" she said. She looked at Rod for a moment without expression and back at her father.

"He'll introduce me and I'll introduce the president of the railroad," Colonel Ball said. "And by the way, Gordon," Ball hastened to add, "I almost forgot. Maxine suggested that you run up to the house this evening and have dinner with us. We'll be looking for you at seven."

"You're very kind," Rod said. He saw the girl's eyes upon him. They held trouble behind the smile she was putting on for him.

"I have some other matters to discuss with you, after dinner," Ball said.

The team and carriage had drawn up before the bank. Colonel Ball got out briskly, helped his daughter down, bowed to Rod.

"If you'll excuse me now, I must get back to the office."

He turned, leaving them alone. Before Rod could speak, she asked:

"How's that bullet nick in your side?"

"It's coming along nicely, thanks. Doc Dixon told me you did a fine dressing job."

"I hope you don't have trouble with it," she said, moving toward her mare at the rack. Rod gave her a hand up. She gigged the mare into a canter and Rod watched her ride down the street.

He walked on down toward his office. Ike Crandall was setting some bags of feed on his general store porch. He looked at Rod without acknowledging him, turned and went back in the store.

There were no customers at the barber shop as Rod passed there. Lute Wormer stood leaning against the doorjamb watching Rod without speaking.

Rod gave him a nod and a half smile, but the barber just stared at him. Then in his fast, clipped way of speaking, Lute said:

"What kind of a turncoat are you, Gordon? You sell out to Colonel Ball like the other lawyer in town?"

Rod paused, felt the heat rise and boil up inside him as he faced the barber.

"Lute," he said softly, "you've known me most of my life. You gave me most of the haircuts I've ever had. Did you ever hear of me selling out to anybody?"

Lute shook his head. "A man blame well changes when he goes to live in the East for a spell."

Rod forced a light laugh. "You must be getting silly in middle age, Lute," he said, and climbed the stairs.

Lute came over and shouted up at him. "I can tell you one thing. I'm mighty ashamed of having you doing business over *my* shop!"

A lonely feeling such as an outcast might feel, Rod thought, stayed with him throughout the day. Everywhere he went, people cut him. Homer Helm, at the lunchroom, had his say when Rod went there to eat at noon.

"Everybody figured maybe you'd changed," Homer said from behind his white oilcloth counter. "Folks been saying 'Rod Gordon's come back a dude—he ain't one of us no more.' But me, I kept saying you'd never change. And I stuck to it till this morning when I seen you riding in that fancy chariot of the colonel's down through town and back, bowing here and there and licking the colonel's boots, so to speak." The fat lunchroom operator laid his big pink hands hard on his counter and leaned on them. "Now, for me, if you don't come into my lunchroom no more, that'll be fine."

"What's the matter with everybody in town?" Rod demanded. "They gone crazy?"

"Some has gone considerable crazy," Helm said, "losing what they worked for a lifetime. You just come back four, five days ago for the first time in some years. We been seeing things this colonel makes happen ever since he's been here."

He glanced at the two deputies as they came in, left Rod and went to wait on them.

ROD got up off the stool and walked over to the general store.

There was a little group at the back behind the hanging hams. He recognized Hack Midland from the livery stable and Harvey Pratt, the undertaker.

Ike Crandall came up behind the counter.

"Was there something you wanted, mister?" he asked in a cold voice.

"There is," Rod said. "A half pound of crackers and a half pound of cheese. A man's got to eat, even in La Mesa."

Owen Bryce called from the group:

"What they going to have to eat at the colonel's tonight, Rod? We hear you're invited for supper."

"Most likely," Hack Midland's voice said, "it'll be turncoat stew."

"It ain't supper he's invited to," Ike said. "The colonel asked him to come to *dinner*." He glared at Rod with his sharp little eyes. "You're getting more hightoned than we even figured you was."

Webster Fremont, who owned a ranch at the south edge of town and sold a little of it to the railroad for the right-of-way and built an addition to his old sod house, stepped out of the group and faced Rod.

"Maybe you'd like to ask the colonel what happened to all my receipts for taxes I paid for years on the Lazy F Spread," he said.

"If you want me to, I will," Rod said. He began munching on the crackers and cheese. "How did you lose them?"

Fremont shrugged. "Just disappeared, that's all. We went to church one Sunday night about two months ago and when we got back our place had been cleaned of everything in the line of papers. Who you figure took those?"

"Was your place sold for back taxes, too?"

"For taxes dating back twelve years. The bank bought up the place for back taxes and I can't raise money enough to take it back without borrowing from the bank, and the bank won't loan me nothing. They claim I got no collateral now that they got the place on tax sale."

"Did you say twelve years back taxes?" Rod demanded.

"That's what I said."

"There's plenty of others in the same boat," the undertaker said. "Blue Harmon wasn't alone."

"And where there ain't tax sales," Fremont said, "there's note and mortgage foreclosures."

"What have you done about it up to now?"

"For one thing," Bryce said, "a half dozen chipped in and brought a lawyer in from Salada. It cost better than a hundred dollars just to get him here and when he got here the sheriff convinced him he didn't have license to practice here. They shipped him out on the next stage."

"Anders won't handle any cases against the colonel," Ike Crandall said. "The colonel made him judge, and he makes money hand over fist on the colonel's business."

"So now the colonel's got you working for him, too, ain't he?" Fremont demanded.

Rod tossed in the last piece of cheese and closed down on the last cracker.

"Not yet he hasn't," he said savagely, and went out.

He walked back to his office, climbed the stairs and sat at the front window with his feet on the ledge, looking out at the busy street that had been just a trail when he was a kid.

"The rottenest break a man ever got," he mused. "Coming to his home town and the only way he can make good is to side a man everybody has figured for a crook. . . ."

At the Ball home that night Maxine met him at the door and invited him in. She managed a smile for him as she took his hat and hung it on the hall rack. Colonel Ball came out of the living room to greet him.

Both father and daughter were hospitable, and Rod was given a fine meal of chicken and dumplings. He sat across the table from Maxine, said little, listened much to the colonel's talk from the head of the table.

"Yes, sir, Gordon," the colonel said, playing on the theme he had chosen from the beginning, "I can help you a lot in getting a good start in this town." He said that same thing in various ways during the entire meal, and when they returned to the living room he said it again there.

"I hope you'll excuse me, Mr. Gordon," Maxine said. "I have to get ready to go out this evening."

Her father gave her a disapproving glance. "Going out, Maxine? I didn't know that."

"Waldo's coming for me," she said. "We're going to singing school."

She didn't look at Rod Gordon again, but turned and went up the stairs.

Colonel Ball said, "That's women for you, Gordon. You never know what they'll do next." He lowered his voice, leaned forward. "Frankly, I think she's a little afraid of hurting Waldo Stone's feelings, inviting you to dinner tonight."

"Don't let it worry you," Rod said and he tied on a smile that he hoped was disarming. "What were you saying about your plans for the new opera house?"

"Oh, yes," the colonel said and he talked on in big figures until Waldo Stone arrived.

After Maxine and Waldo left the colonel talked on until heavy feet pounded on the porch. He got up and went to the door.

"Where the devil have you been, Sheriff?" Rod heard him say. "I've been wanting to see you."

There was some low mumbling out there then Sheriff Kruse's voice came plainly:

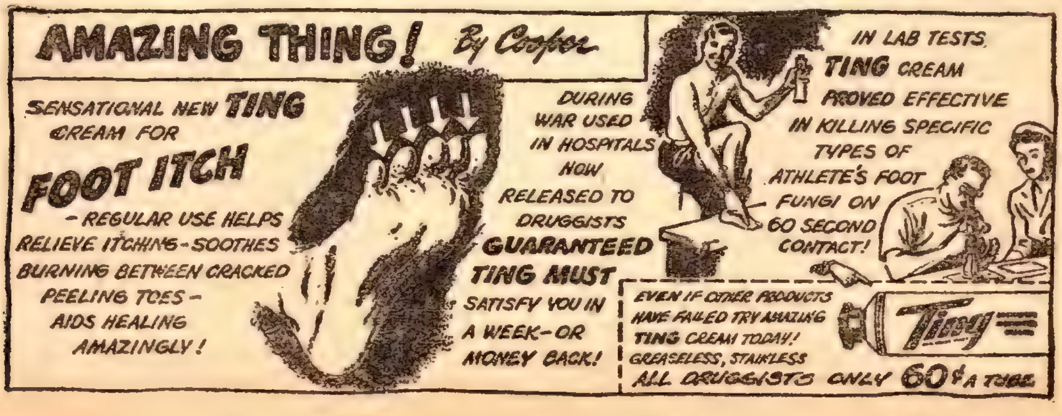
"I've been up at the other end of the county on business, Colonel. Sorry I kept you waiting."

"Come in," Colonel Ball barked. "I've got someone in here I want you to see. I want to see you square yourself with Rod Gordon in my presence."

Kruse appeared uneasy as he looked at Gordon, then glanced back at the colonel and waited.

"You know this man, Sheriff," Ball

[*Turn page*]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thundered. "You should! He gave you a good beating for acting like a fool and I'm glad he did."

Sheriff Kruse went white. His hands moved closer to his guns.

"I want you to apologize for trying to keep Gordon from entering the undertaking room," growled Ball. "How far do you think your authority goes, Kruse?"

"I guess that was a blunder on my part," the sheriff said. "Fact is, Gordon, I was so worked up, having to shoot old man Harmon, I didn't know what I was doing."

"What I want to know," Colonel Ball boomed, "is why you had to kill Harmon in the first place? You certainly didn't think he could outdraw you, did you, Kruse?"

"The old man had a mighty reputation as a gun hand," Kruse said weakly.

"That's no excuse," Ball snapped. "You could have outdrawn him and winged him in the shoulder or some place where it wouldn't kill him."

"You can pull down the curtain on the show now, Colonel," Rod drawled. "Your sheriff is no actor and you're almost as bad."

Colonel Ball turned on him, his dark face dangerous with anger. "What do you mean? What in tarnation kind of talk is that?"

"You know what I mean," Rod said. "I've been trying to believe you're a great and good man in spite of some things I've seen and heard. After what I read about you in the local paper while I was at school I came here expecting to find you a solid, upright citizen. I wanted to be like you. Then I began hearing things about your methods. But I have been taught that judgment should be made only after all conclusive proof has been established. So I kept trying to consider you honest, but after this act you and your sheriff have been putting on I'm through trying to be a law-abiding gentleman. From now on, I'll be a law-abiding bobcat full of snarl and scratch, trying to help the people I grew up with to save what little they have left in the world."

THE darkness of Colonel Ball's face deepened with angry color. A trace of hard mirth played around the cruel eyes of the lawman and suddenly Kruse let out a harsh laugh.

Colonel Ball turned on him. "Shut up, you tin-horn sheriff!"

"Shut up, my Aunt Maria!" Kruse said. "Now *you've* got the new pettifogger on your neck. How do *you* like him?"

Colonel Ball stood motionless for a moment, then, with dignity, he turned to Gordon.

"Young man," he said, "you're making the biggest mistake you'll ever make in your life. You're throwing away a brilliant career as an attorney for some sentimental foolishness that won't bring in a nickel. You'll regret this—"

"I don't think so," Rod cut in. "A man has to live with himself and what's more he has to sleep with himself. I never was much good at sleeping after close association with a skunk, and don't ask me if I'm calling you one, because I am."

Colonel Ball leveled his eyes at the lawyer and his face was snarling.

"You back-biting coyote," he said. "You doublecrossing toad. You make eyes at my daughter and accept her invitation to dinner. You eat our food, then turn on us like a mad dog. And you talk about having a conscience that's clean enough to sleep with!"

Rod was growing hotter under the collar all the time.

"I told you I'd been honestly trying to believe your setup was clean and within the law. That was before I found out that your tax and mortgage foreclosures of late have been on such a wholesale basis. Now you and Kruse, in attempting to get me to close my eyes to such deals have gone too far."

Rod started for the door.

Colonel Ball followed him two paces. "What do you think you're going to do about it?"

"You'll find out in time."

"I'll break you," Colonel Ball said savagely. He twisted an imaginary enemy in his big hands. "I'll break you into insignificant pieces and feed you to the buzzards!"

Sheriff Kruse stood with folded arms, and a broad grin on his face.

"You'll want all your crew of gunmen then," Rod said. "But in case you think you're man enough to handle it alone"—he put his arms behind him and thrust his chin out—"start breaking."

He waited for a moment, then turned and went out into the night.

X

HACK MIDLAND was still at his livery stable bedding down the horses when Rod Gordon said, "I want to borrow a horse. I'm riding out to see Webster Fremont and see if he'll let me handle his business."

Hack stood with the pitchfork in his hands and stared at Rod. His little stable man, "Bump" Yost, peered out from inside.

"You gone loco?" Hack asked. "Don't you know there ain't a man or woman in this town that'd trust you with his business after seeing you hobnobbing with Ball and his daughter, going up to his house tonight and all?"

"Hack," Rod said, "you've got this all wrong. I'm ambitious to make good, sure. But there's things more important than that. There's the trust of my old friends and neighbors that's bigger—"

"Horsehair," Hack rasped. "Now you're sounding like a politician making a speech."

Rod sobered. "Hack, believe me. I'm serious."

"Sure," Hack said. "The colonel's got you corralled for sure and now he sends you out to get the confidence of us that seen you grow from a squalling brat to a turncoat that ain't fit to live in the same town with decent folks."

Rod Gordon gave up arguing for the moment.

"All right, Hack, if that's the way you want to feel," he said. "But I just got through telling Colonel Ball that from now on I'm fighting him tooth and nail to see if we can't get some justice started in this boom town." He started away. Half-way across the road he paused, to shout back: "And if you come to your senses by tomorrow morning, you might tell anybody that's got a grievance against Colonel Ball or his bank to be at my office by one o'clock in the afternoon."

He walked on to the hotel and ran to his room. He wanted to be alone, with the door shut, so he could calm down, and think.

As he got the door opened he felt the breeze from the open window over the flat tar-paper roof at the rear. The heat of the sun had brought out a strong smell of tar.

Rod struck a match, lit the lamp and as he replaced the chimney a sound reached him from the corner of the room beside the bed, a slight crunching sound as of a heel or a boot sole twisting on the floor. In the lamplight he glanced over to the bed.

A small figure rose from beside it, slightly crouched over the six-shooter in his right hand.

"Loony!" Rod cried. "Loony Tate! What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, Rod," he said. His voice was low and cold. The hammer of his six-shooter was cocked. "Clumb up the tree aside the kitchen and walked over the roof. Bump Yost told me where your room was at."

The strange little man began moving about. Sweat stood out on his forehead and he got in front of the open window where the breeze riffled his sweat-soaked dirty blue shirt.

Rod started toward him slowly. "I don't know what you've got that gun aimed at me for, Loony. We've always been friends, haven't we?"

"Up to the other night when they come for me and I know'd then you was a squealer on your old friends."

"What's the matter with this town?" Rod barked. "Has everybody gone crazy? I even licked the sheriff for killing Blue Harmon but people seem to be hating me more and more."

"Because you taken up with the colonel," Loony said. "Bump Yost was just telling me down to the livery. He says folks say you had a put-up job with the sheriff to make it look like you was against the colonel. Folks says you teamed up with the sheriff against your old friends."

"They ought to know better."

Loony tightened his finger on the trigger. "Don't come no closer, Rod. I'm going to gun you but I got things to say first."

ROD felt the sweat pour out on his own forehead.

"What in the world would you want to gun me for, Loony?"

"For squealing. And for coming back to double-cross all the folks that was your friends."

"You're not a killer, Loony. You never killed a man in your life, did you?"

"Not yet. But we never had no times like these before. When folks needed somebody like you to count on leadin' 'em and then find out you're a snake in the mesquite. That's what Bump Yost told me everybody's saying."

"They're wrong," Rod said. "What's this squealing business you're charging me with, Loony?"

"Squealing on me to the colonel and the sheriff and his men that I seen how they killed Blue Harmon," Loony said. "You was the only one seen me out back of the barn."

"Now wait a minute," Rod said. Then he suddenly realized that even if he told Loony about the man on the ridge it would sound like a trumped-up lie. But he told him anyway.

As Rod had expected, Loony cocked a skeptical eye at him and shook his head. "You see, Rod? You got so you can't even tell a lie straight. There couldn't have been a man on the ridge or I'd of seen him."

"I only saw this man for a moment, then he was gone behind the ridge."

"You learned smart arguments while you was East," Loony said. "But you ain't good enough to talk me out of what I'm figurin' to do."

"You'd be hung for killing me, Loony," Rod said easily. "Besides, you've got no cause for it. I tell you I didn't say anything to anybody about seeing you at Harmon's. I told you I wouldn't."

Loony shook his head. "I better get it done before you change my mind. If you seen a rider on the ridge, who was it?"

"He looked like a big man," Rod said, "And I'd say he had a black beard, but it was too far off to tell for certain."

"You're just trying to make me believe the sheriff left his deputy, Bowie, to watch," Loony said. "You're trying to make me think Bowie seen me and then got Idaho and come up to kill me."

"They did what?"

"As if you didn't know."

"Loony, believe me—" Rod stared at him. "Is that what you meant when you said somebody came up to get you?"

Loony nodded, still eyed Rod Gordon skeptically. But Rod got the story out of him.

"I been hiding out ever since," Loony said. "Then tonight I sneaked into town after dark and told my friend, Bump, I was coming down to tell you what I figured you was for squealing on me. Bump says it'd be a good thing if you'd never come back, and now I figure it'd be a good thing if you didn't stay."

"Then there was something more to Blue Harmon's killing than I know about?" Rod said. "I licked the sheriff after I found out he could have winged old Blue if he'd wanted to, instead of putting two slugs in his heart."

Loony frowned, then the corners of his grotesquely wide mouth turned up and he almost laughed. "You figured that was what happened?"

"What did happen, Loony?" Rod moved closer again.

"They'll kill me if I tell."

"They'll kill you if you kill me, too. What *did* you see at Blue Harmon's that you're afraid to tell? Didn't they even give Blue a chance?"

A half derisive chuckle came from Loony. Suddenly he half-turned, as if he had heard something outside the window.

THERE came the distant crack of a rifle. Loony Tate jerked, reeled toward the window. As Rod leaped for him, the gun fell from Loony's hand and the little man slumped. Rod caught him, eased him to the floor, spun round and blew out the lamp.

He looked into the night outside the window, tried to figure where the shot had come from. The bark of the rifle had sounded a good distance off. Two hundred yards maybe.

"Are you hit bad, Loony?" he asked. "Did you see who shot you?"

Loony groaned but there was no word from him.

Rod's hand felt blood coming from a hole in the little man's back and he held his finger over the hole, temporarily to stop the flow.

"You're hit in a bad place, Loony. You want to tell now what you know about Blue Harmon's death?"

Loony wasn't talking yet, however.

There was no sign of movement outside against the starlit sky. There was a little light spraying from a half dozen windows with lamps but it was dim.

"A man with a rifle couldn't miss with you outlined against the light in here, framed in the open window as you were, Loony."

"Eyah." Loony said. "Rod, I—"

"Yes, Loony."

"Rod—I don't reckon—I got much longer—"

"I'll get you to Doc Dixon right away, Loony."

"Good. I—I guess—you're all right —Rod."

"Thanks," said Rod. "Come on, now, and brace yourself. I'll lift you up. Just pray that Doc's home. He'll fix you up in a jiffy."

Loony moaned as Rod gathered him off the floor and lifted him in his arms. Now that he was holding the slight figure Rod thought of his own guns. He had kept them more as relics of the past than with any idea that he would ever have any use for them again. He hadn't figured there would be use for them in the thriving, growing town of La Mesa where gun play was almost a thing of the past. Now he wished he had them around his waist, but they were hanging for decoration on the wall of his office, at the end of the desk.

He carried Loony down the stairs. Half a dozen loungers in the lobby leaped to their feet, staring. Rans Speller, the hotel proprietor, hurried out from behind the desk, asking what had happened.

"Loony Tate and I were talking in my room," Rod said quickly. "Somebody shot him through the open window. I'm taking him up to Doc Dixon." He was striding toward the door as he spoke. "Any of you men got your guns with you, come along. Walk close to us and, if anybody tries to interfere, shoot to kill."

"Hey," Rans exploded, "what kind of talk is that? What you expectin' to happen?"

"Loony knows how Blue Harmon was killed," Rod said. "It wasn't fair, and the law's gunning for Loony."

Two of the men were moving out with them now, then a third joined them. They walked close to Rod, and they carried their guns ready.

Rod strode up the middle of the street carrying Loony. There weren't many out at that time of the evening. Those who were, gathered around, asked questions. Angry talk began to buzz.

Rod carried Loony into the doctor's office and laid him on the black leather couch. Doc Dixon was in, and quickly began working on him.

"He was trying to tell me some things," Rod said to the doctor. "I guess he passed out when I started carrying him."

"He isn't dead," Doc said. "But he's mighty close to it. The shock put him out, but I imagine he'll come back again, at least for a while."

HE probed for the bullet. A half-dozen men had come in and were standing around, their faces red and coppery in the yellow lamp light as they watched in silent resentment.

"You say, Rod, that you and Loony was talking in your hotel room when somebody shot him through the window?" one of them asked.

The young attorney nodded without taking his eyes from Doc's work. "I shouldn't have let him stand by the open window. But I didn't know until just before it happened that he was in any danger, that Deputy Bowie and Idaho Vance were gunning for him."

"You're getting a little confused, ain't you, Rod?" an old settler asked. "Bowie and Idaho and the sheriff, they're the colonel's men, remember."

"Shucks," another one of the men said. "You can't tell what tricks will be tried. But the bank's got everything of mine. I got nothing left but my wife who's working at the hotel, and my hide, so I reckon I'll get used to being broke and treated any which way."

"What are you talking about?" Rod demanded, turning to glance at him.

The man glared at him, shrugged and walked out of the office. He hesitated, came back. "I don't reckon you might have shot Loony?" He shook his head. "No, I guess not or we'd have heard the shot. I didn't hear a shot at all."

"The shot," Rod said, choosing his words carefully, "came from behind the hotel. It was a rifle shot and might have come from as much as two hundred yards away. Loony made an easy target in the open window with a lamp lit inside."

Charlie Mann, the stocky saddler, said, "I don't suppose you could have fixed it for him to be standing there, could you, Rod?"

Mann said that at the door. He turned and went out with the others.

XI

DOC finished bandaging Loony and straightened. He turned to look at Rod and there was sympathy and understanding in his eyes.

"I'm pretty sure you're on the level, Rod," he said, "but it's funny how a thing like this builds up. You'd have made out all right if everybody hadn't been so tense about conditions here, and looking for trouble. Then you moved in dressed like a dude and—" He paused to shake his head. "Rod, we've seen you as a cowhand and a ruckus raiser in blue denim. It's hard to get used to you here acting as important as Colonel Ball. Then when we see you riding with him and his daughter, and when you go up to his house for dinner and then try to tell folks they've got to fight the bank and Colonel Ball legally, it makes us wonder just which side you're on."

"I did have hopes of becoming something worth while legally," Rod said. "Dad mortgaged everything he had to give me an education. A man would want to make something of himself after that. But I didn't realize, at first, what a strangle-hold Colonel Ball had on La Mesa."

"You think you do now?" Doc asked.

"I know which side I'm on. I tried to tell Hack Midland to have everybody at my office tomorrow at one that felt he'd been cheated or swindled by the colonel."

Doc Dixon shook his head. "You'll have a crowd of folks if they all come, Rod. It'll look like old home week. But you won't have as easy a time as if you sided with the colonel. He'll block you every turn you take."

"He's already threatened to do that. I told him how I felt about all this at his house tonight."

Doc turned, looked down at Loony. "He's coming out of it some."

Loony's lips began mumbling. The sounds were beginning to make a word and he seemed to be trying to repeat it over and over.

" 'Blood,' " Rod said, coming as close as he could to the sound that Loony was making. " 'Blood.' "

Doc Dixon leaned over with one ear close to the bloody lips. The sound kept coming. Loony was doing his best to get it out. The little man opened his eyes and they rolled and he struggled with the sound.

"He's not saying 'Blood,' " Doc said.

"No," Rod said. "That last letter of the word is shorter than a D. It's blunt, more like a T."

Doc Dixon looked over at Rod. "Remember old Dutch Berger that used to work at Dave Merrill's mill and feed store before a bale of hay fell on him and killed him?"

"Yes."

"If Dutch was saying 'blood' he'd say, 'bloodt'."

"That's almost what Loony's word sounds like. But there seems to be one more syllable. It sounds a little more like 'bolloodt'."

Rod stood motionless for an instant, staring down at Loony, then he looked up. "He's trying to say 'bullet.' "

Doc Dixon nodded. "I believe you're right."

"Did you probe those bullets out of Blue Harmon?"

"Of course not," Doc Dixon said. "What would be the sense of taking out the bullets? Sheriff Kruse admitted his bullets killed old Blue."

"I know," Rod said. "But—" He faced the doctor. "Can I borrow one of your operating knives and a shovel, Doc?"

"Why, sure, but—" The light of understanding came into Doc Dixon's eyes. "Tonight you're going to dig, Rod?"

"It's cooler at night," Rod said.

"And fewer around to watch you," said the doctor. He started out the door. "Come on." He picked a scalpel from the table as he passed, handed it to Rod. "There's your cutting tool. Now, I'll get you a digging tool. Want some help?"

"No. He was buried only yesterday. It shouldn't be hard digging. You stay here and save Loony Tate, if you can. At least see if you can get any more out of him, if he's got to go."

Doc led the way to the barn and got him a shovel and a lantern. "You'll need light when you come to the cutting. Good luck."

"Thanks," Rod said.

He strode off through the back lot toward the cemetery.

UP on the little rise back of the old church, Rod Gordon dug silently except for the times when his shovel would strike a stone. Then there would be the ring of steel against the stone and the noise would echo across the silence of the night.

The stars hung low and the air was cool with the first hint of fall to come. Rod worked with his coat off and his white shirt sleeves rolled up.

There was a dull thud finally when the shovel struck wood and he knew he was down to the coffin. Every scrape of the shovel made a hollow sound. He worked lightly, for the night was still. Any sound coming from the cemetery in the middle of the night would attract attention.

He paused now and then to listen, to make sure that he wasn't being watched. And each time he decided that he was alone, and worked on.

He got the earth cleared away from the coffin, pried up the lid and put it on the side of the grave. Old Blue Harmon lay there peacefully staring up at the stars.

Rod decided there was no use lighting the lantern until he got down to digging out the bullets. He managed to open Blue's coat and shirt and undershirt, then felt for the bullet wounds.

He reached for the lantern and bent to light it, standing shoulder deep in the grave. Suddenly he paused. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he had heard a sound. There was some hammering off at the south end of town but his ears were trying to catch something he had heard nearer.

Standing there with the lighted lantern in his hand, he waited. Off in the night a litter of coyote pups began yip-yipping as the moon rimmed the horizon. A screech owl shuddered the air with his vibrant cry, then a dog barked up at the end of town and another dog answered him faintly from off toward the gulch.

But there were no sounds he could detect that meant danger. When the movement did come it was like a sudden rustling breeze out of nowhere. The sound of a quick little wind, rustling grass and leaves and air as a strong arm lashed itself through the air.

The sound was back of him, not more than a few feet from the pile of dirt he had thrown up. He tried to turn, tried to duck at the same time, not knowing what he was ducking.

The crash came like the sound of the

mirror and all the whisky bottles breaking at once behind a bar. There seemed to be flashes of light about him, and he was going down, borne under the weight of a giant's pressure.

He tried to keep from falling into the coffin but he had no power and no control. Then something clubbed him on his already injured head. The flashes lighted the world about him, then went out.

Blackness moved in and enveloped him. . . .

What seemed like a long time afterward there was a rumbling roar, like a great landslide. Rod Gordon could not think or feel. He only knew in the vaguest way that there was sound and it was in his head. Then a voice was speaking his name from a hundred miles off.

Doc Dixon's voice was speaking his name.

"You're coming out of it now, Rod," the doctor said. "Come on. I didn't think you'd ever come around, but maybe you'll make it."

Rod lifted his eyelids part way, but they seemed like heavy sacks of sand. He saw Doc Dixon looking down at him and there was a ceiling above Doc. The ceiling had hand-hewn beams with the ax marks still in them. There was a big knot-hole in the ceiling board directly above him, just past Doc's left ear. The knot-hole held Rod's eyes and helped him steady his focus.

"You're all right, Rod," Doc was saying.

Another man's voice sounded behind Doc, and Rod tried to see who it was, but pain was stabbing like a long sword run through his skull.

The voice spoke again. "You reckon he'll be all right now, Doc?"

"Must have been that Rod was just too tough to be killed," Doc Dixon said. "He's likely to live forever if that beating he took over the head with that stone didn't finish him."

ROD came wider awake. Then he saw Hack Midland with his long, gaunt, yellowish face looking graver than he had ever seen it.

"I want you to know, Rod," Hack said, "we're sorry the way—"

Doc pushed him back saying, "Not now, Hack. He's just coming out."

"I know," Hack said. "But it seems if I tell him, he'll get well quicker, maybe."

"Later," Doc said. "He's been out two days and I don't want him to slip back so close to leaving us as he was." He put his big hand on Rod's forehead. "You take it easy and get some sleep, then Mrs. Dixon'll bring in some broth for you."

Rod was suddenly glad he wouldn't have to talk. He closed his eyes and floated off.

When he came back it was evening and a lamp was lit on the dresser and there was a good smell of strong boiled beef in the air. Sim Colton had come over from his drug store with some things the doctor had ordered. He smiled his reserved smile at Rod and asked:

"You got no idea who tried to beat you to death? I mean you didn't see who it was?"

Rod began to shake his head and stopped, remembering the pain before.

"No. It was sudden and from behind me. I'll be glad to know just what happened and how I got here at Doc's house."

"If you feel up to it, I'll tell you in the morning," Doc said.

XII

EARLY the next morning, Rod awoke, feeling better. His head was clear and didn't ache except when he rolled it quickly on the pillow. He lay there with the room growing light from the rising sun and he went back in his mind over the last things he recalled.

Again and again he went over what Loony had said. Loony had been talking about bullets or a bullet. There were two bullets in Blue Harmon, therefore Loony must have meant bullets plural.

When Doc came in later with a tray of food Rod asked him:

"What chance has Loony got to live, Doc?"

"Take it easy," Doc said. "Loony died the same night that you got it at Blue Harmon's grave."

"Did he talk any more?"

"Not a word after you left."

"I've been thinking," Rod said as he ate his breakfast. "The bullets Loony meant must have been the ones in Blue Harmon. And I've got a hunch that those bullets weren't fired by Sheriff Kruse's guns."

"Yes," Doc said. "I came to the same conclusion. The bullets must have been something other than a forty-four or forty-five."

"I think Looney was trying to tell us they were rifle bullets," Rod said. "Maybe tomorrow I'll be up and around and we'll go after Blue again and dig out the bullets."

"There aren't any bullets," Doc said. "Not in Blue Harmon."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't hear from you that night you went to dig up Blue. So at daylight, after Loony died, I went to the cemetery to see how you were coming. You were there with some dirt over you. Luckily, your face had landed against the side of Blue's coffin and you were getting what little air you needed. Whoever knocked you over the head with a rock did a clumsy job in the dark. They tried to make it look as if the grave had caved in on you but the bloody rock was there."

A wry smile twisted Rod Gordon's mouth. "And the old settlers figured I was working with the colonel."

"They don't any more," Doc said. "That's what Hack Midland was here to tell you when you first opened your eyes. They're ready to follow whatever you say as soon as you're able to get around."

"Tomorrow," Rod said.

Doc shook his head. "Not tomorrow, nor the next day."

"We'll see," Rod said. "What's this about Blue Harmon's body having no bullets in it?"

"Well, after I got you back to the house and patched up all I could, I left you with my wife and went back to the cemetery. I got down in Blue's grave and began probing for those bullets, only to find out that somebody had cut open his back and taken the bullets out that way, then turned him over again, face up."

Rod felt his head aching again. He closed his eyes. "That makes it clear enough to me now that they must have been rifle bullets," he said.

"There's one other thing maybe you can figure out when you feel up to it," Doc said. "Those two bullets went in at angles."

Rod looked at him sharply. "How do you mean?"

DOC pointed at his own chest. "Their paths crossed. Both pierced Blue's heart but they crossed to do it."

"I don't see what you mean."

"There were two bullet holes about over his heart, remember?" Doc said. "All right. The bullet that went in from

[*Turn page*]

Some men are born to be sheriffs, some look for the job,
and others have it thrust on them—like Sunset West,
who was elected against his will and had to take
the trail of The Copperhead, mysterious
and dangerous "playing card" killer!

FATE AND A FORTY-FIVE

By W. C. TUTTLE

AN EXCITING COMPLETE NOVELET—COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE!

the left side came in at an angle, almost as if Blue had been turned nearly sideward when the shot was fired. But the bullet that entered about six inches to the right had torn a course back to the left—Blue's left. So the two bullets crossed almost in entering the heart."

"Now, wait," Rod said, his hands working on his chest, getting the direction. "You say the bullet that entered Blue's right tore a course as if Blue had been standing almost sideward to the gunman when that bullet hit him? Then the bullet coming from the other way would mean that he had turned almost completely around to have it enter—" A grim expression came over Rod Gordon's face. "Listen, Doc."

"What is it?"

"I think I know what Loony was trying to tell us. Blue Harmon didn't turn one way or the other as he was shot. Let's see if it could happen this way. Sheriff Kruse came at Blue Harmon's place straight toward the front door, calling for Blue to come out. But Kruse had two deputies with him. They came up on either side of the house. Now, if the bullets Loony was talking about were regular six-gun slugs, there wouldn't have been anything for him to mention. But he kept talking about bullets, so we'll guess they were from rifles. The two deputies came up on the sides and when Blue showed himself they plugged him."

Doc's face was white. "Why, the sidewinders! Blue didn't have a—"

"Not a chance," Rod said. "They made sure he'd be an example to anybody else who had an idea of resisting the colonel. They burned the house to make it look that much worse. Nobody could do anything to the colonel for ordering it burned, if he did. It was his house and I don't expect there was any insurance on it."

Doc was scowling angrily. "From what you've worked out, Rod, Sheriff Kruse didn't fire a shot at Blue."

"Not a shot," Rod said. "He simply walked up as if he was going to try to outdraw the old man, and when Blue came out on the porch, watching Kruse, the two deputies had their rifles aimed from either side. They got him maybe before he even saw them."

Doc got a cigar out of his pocket and snipped the end off it with the gold cigar clip on his watch chain. He took deliberate time to light the cigar, then he blew a gray stream of smoke at the ceiling.

"No wonder Colonel Ball has massed so much control in this town," he said coldly, "when he takes no more chances in a deal than he did with dispossessing Blue Harmon."

There was a long silence. Rod sat in bed with arms around his hunched-up legs and his chin resting on his knees. He stared into space.

"What do you propose to do if everybody gets behind you, Rod?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "The first thing I'd like to find out is how much land and property Colonel Ball has grabbed in various ways. What he's taken in mortgage foreclosures I can't do much about. If property owners were foolish enough to sign demand notes and mortgages and not be able to pay on demand, that's their lookout. But where there's been known fraudulent tax sales and property has been taken over in that way, we may be able to prove something."

"Prove what to whom?" Doc said. "Colonel Ball owns Judge Anders and whatever court there is in La Mesa."

"I've heard that."

"And he got his own county clerk appointed. Some supposed expert from St. Louis the colonel brought here. He's been remaking the whole tax record system."

Rod sighed heavily. Just what he *could* do he didn't know—yet.

HACK MIDLAND seemed to have taken it upon himself to act as go-between for the wronged citizens and Rod Gordon. He came to Doc's house late that afternoon and sat down in Rod's room.

"Rod," he said, "the folks that want to back you are a little slow in getting started. Some haven't lost everything yet and they're afraid if they back you against the colonel most anything'll happen to them."

Rod was strong enough to sit on the edge of the bed with his legs hanging. He sat there with a blanket around him and nodded his bandaged head slowly.

"Can't blame them, really. After Blue getting killed and burned out."

"There'll be enough, though, to make a strong showing," Hack said. "They want to hold a meeting, on the quiet. When do you figure you'll be feeling fit, Rod?"

Doc Dixon, standing in the doorway, said, "I think I can let him go about day after tomorrow."

"How about tomorrow?" Rod said. "Why can't they come here? Almost a dozen could get in this bedroom and we could talk and I could have time to think it over."

Doc looked at Hack and nodded. "If he feels up to it, it's all right with me."

When Hack Midland left Doc came back into Rod's bedroom.

"I'm not surprised that most of the folks are nervous about rising up against Colonel Ball," he said soberly.

"I'm wondering about one thing," Rod said thoughtfully. "How is Hack fixed financially? I mean does he owe the colonel anything that might embarrass him?"

"No," Doc said slowly, "I think Hack is in the clear, a good citizen fighting for the good of the community. Now you better get some rest."

Rod slept during the rest of the afternoon and early evening. When he awoke, there were voices in the hall outside.

"I'll see, Waldo," he heard Doc saying. "He'll sure appreciate you coming over to ask about him, anyway."

Then Doc Dixon came in to say the newspaperman had come to call on Rod.

Waldo was sympathetic in his reserved fashion. He sat down and they lighted cigarettes and talked. Finally, Waldo took the inevitable copy paper and pencil from his pocket.

"About this accident you had up in the cemetery," he asked. "Just how did it happen, Rod?"

"Is this for publication," Rod asked, "or your own private information?"

"Both." Waldo half-smiled, lowered his voice. "There's been so much rumor going around that I'd like to get the straight of your story."

"It wasn't much," Rod said. "I was up there trying to find out what kind of bullets killed Blue Harmon. I must have done a poor job of digging open the grave because it caved in on me and half buried me. Some rocks hit my head and knocked me out."

"I see," Waldo said. "You don't think there was anything to one story I've heard about somebody hitting you over the head?"

"Well, it all happened so fast," Rod said.

Waldo moved closer to the bed. "I hear there's a little group going to back you against the colonel on a general county uprising."

"I've told the colonel I'm going to give him a fight," Rod said. "If any of the boys want to join me and get some justice in La Mesa, I'll be glad of their help."

"You know," Waldo said, leaning forward, "I think you're the one to head this fight. I'll be glad to do all I can, in a quiet sort of way."

"You?" Rod asked. "I thought you and Maxine Ball were rather serious about each other."

"She's a fine girl," Waldo said, "and I think the world of her. But she doesn't like the way her father conducts business any more than the rest of us do."

Rod waited. Waldo was doing all right.

"I get around through the country gathering news," Waldo said. "I'd be glad to spread it around that you'd work with anyone to get justice against the colonel, if you have anyone in mind."

ROD thought of mentioning the proposed meeting tomorrow night. Then he wasn't so sure. There would be time after they had the wheels rolling.

"Thanks, Waldo," he said. "I think we'll just let them come to see me if they feel like it."

Waldo put away his paper, slipped the pencil in his vest pocket and rose.

"Hurry and get well, Rod," he said. "We need you here. If I can do anything, let me know."

"I sure will," Rod said.

Doc Dixon came in after Waldo had gone.

"None of us can be sure," he said, "but we think the colonel's got Waldo snared tighter than a Philadelphia-drawn chattel mortgage. And of course he runs around with Maxine."

"Would you blame a man for liking Maxine?"

"No, but a slick hombre like Waldo isn't likely to be turning against his future father-in-law."

"Waldo says Maxine is against the kind of business her father transacts."

"That wouldn't surprise me," Doc Doc said. "Maxine's a fine girl."

"But you think Waldo's working for the colonel?"

"Well, a short time after the colonel took over the bank, Waldo started going with Maxine, and his paper began praising the colonel, telling all he was going to do for the town. Next thing, Waldo built a new print shop and office down back of the bank."

"I'm glad to get that clear," Rod said.

He turned to the window, startled by a sudden flare of light outside. Someone shouted down at the lower end of town. Others took up the cry.

"Fire! Fire!"

Doc Dixon headed for the front door, and Rod slipped out of the bed and followed him. They could see flame and sparks climbing into the night.

"It's some place back of the Donna Hotel," Doc said, reaching for his hat.

Rod thought of a lot of things all at once, among them of Hack Midland coming to see him that afternoon to arrange for a meeting of citizens tomorrow night. Hack had mentioned there were some who feared that the colonel might have something done to them if they sided against him.

"It's the livery stable!" Rod said. "Hack Midland's livery stable is on fire."

Mrs. Dixon came out, asking questions. She caught up a shawl, threw it over her head and shoulders, and hurried outside with her husband.

Rod stood in the doorway with his blanket about him as the doctor and his wife hurried down the path to the road.

The buildings on the other side of the street were dark blotches silhouetted against the light that spread over the back street from the livery stable fire. For the instant that Rod Gordon stood there alone, he let his eyes travel over those buildings with one thought in mind. Somewhere over there someone had seen Hack Midland come to the doctor's house and had divined that he was arranging trouble for the colonel with Rod Gordon.

In that brief instant he searched, his eyes caught a sharp outline on the floor of the alley between the saddlery and the Bon Ton Millinery. There was the unmistakable outline of the top of a bare head, a pair of shoulders and a pair of heels. The man was prone and in a strange position, with his head cocked slightly to one side and his shoulders hunched.

Rod was sure he knew what job that man had taken on. He was lying in the alley with a rifle before him, aimed at one Rod Gordon, in the doctor's doorway.

With all the shouting and running in the street, a rifle shot from an alley would not be noticed.

Rod quickly stepped inside and back of the door. There was a light in the living room and some of its rays shone into the hall where Rod was standing. He had made a good target there in the faint light. Almost as good a target as Loony Tate had made in Rod's open hotel window.

Rod stepped back into the shadow of a heavy plush portiere, watched from there, and in moments more knew he was right.

He saw the outlined man relax his aim and straighten slightly.

The light increased on the back street and it showed the man more clearly, but not enough for Rod to tell who he was.

XIII

QUICKLY Rod Gordon slipped back to his room, without being seen through the open door. He was weak and wobbly and his hands shook as he drew on his clothes. He thought of Loony and what had happened to the strange little man, and the reaction was helpful, for it angered him.

He got on his pants and shirt and picked up his boots.

There was a stealthy tread at the front door. He heard a board squeak just inside the front doorway and then another.

For an instant Rod considered taking up the challenge. He glanced about the lighted bedroom for a weapon, but saw nothing available except a slim window stick and an earthen water pitcher on the washstand. Neither could compete with a rifle.

He slipped into the kitchen and to the back door.

From up front he could hear the killer coming, moving carefully. How he would like to face that man down! But he had no guns.

As silently as he could, he opened the kitchen door and stepped into the backyard. The steps coming through the house quickened. Then the man pursuing him was at the back door.

Crouched double, Rod was moving along the side of the house. He slipped around the rain barrel at the corner, waited. The back door didn't open.

The blaze down on the back street was making the whole town bright. It would show every move he made if the man inside the house should be looking out of a window in the right direction.

Rod crawled along the ground for the cover of brush twenty feet from the house. From there, he made the back of the old newspaper office, now a poolroom. The lights were on inside. He could see the lamps around the room and the chandelier above. He could see the green of the tables and the balls in place and cues laid on the table where the players had hurriedly put them down to run to the fire.

He crept around the back of that building, gained the next, and the next.

More than anything else just now, he wanted to get to his office and strap on his old guns.

Off in the night men were yelling and women were screaming. A horse whinnied in frantic fear and another horse screamed in torment. Rod shuddered. Then a violent rage rushed up inside him, but his heart began pounding his brain to show him how weak he still was.

He got down almost to the site for the railroad tracks before he crossed Main Street. Then he hurried on with two boys who were out of breath from running a long way to the fire. He hurried until he got on the side of the street where his office was, then slowed and moved along, keeping close to the shadows of the building fronts.

He reached the barber shop which was almost as bright as it would be on a dull day, and waited there, watching for pursuit. The yelling at the fire died down. There was only the roar of the flames and the crackling of the wood.

With the office key in his hand, he mounted the stairs, going up backward, so he could watch for anyone taking aim at him. He saw no one and went inside.

The burning livery stable lighted up his office through the window. He made a shadow on the wall as he walked across the floor to the desk. He sat down at the desk for a moment to regain his breath and his strength.

The guns were hanging on the wall at the end of the desk. He had arranged them neatly, with the two holsters and guns showing at the bottoms of the belt loops. He had put them up there only a few days ago.

Now he stood up and reached for them, and in his weakened state they seemed heavier than they had before. He strapped the belts about his waist and inspected the guns, first the right-hand gun, then the left. He made sure of full loads in each, then he spun the cylinders for free action and dropped them in their holsters.

Above the sounds down at the livery stable fire he heard a creaking step, and paused with the right-hand gun in his hand. Walking quietly, he moved over to the office door and looked out of the single-pane window in the upper part of the door.

FROM that angle he could see only part way down the stairs. His head began aching from the exertion. He waited several minutes. When there was no further sound he made up his mind he had imagined the one before.

He considered what he should do for the rest of the night. He felt like lying down and getting more rest. The escape from Doc's house had been a strain.

There was a blanket over the back of his desk chair, a thin old saddle blanket he had folded just right to cover the hole in the back of the second-hand chair he had picked up.

He spread it out on the floor across the threshold of the locked door and lay down on it, keeping close to the door so that he wouldn't be easily seen from outside.

He laid his gun by his hand and tried to get some sleep. But his nerves were jumpy. Never before had he been the object of a man hunt. He had been threatened by crooks and card sharps, but not in his lifetime until now had he felt the sensation of being tracked down.

He tried not to think of that. There was planning to be done. He had an idea or two about getting a look at the records of back taxes. From what he had heard there wasn't much chance to look at back tax records, checking against the colonel's purchases of tax-delinquent property. The new system at the courthouse had made any such investigation impossible.

He lay thinking about those matters when a light sleep smothered his thoughts and he felt no more pain nor concern. . . .

There was no way of telling how long he had been asleep. The fire had burned down so far that he judged the livery stable must be pretty well a smoldering heap.

He lay suddenly wide awake, listening, and trying to get his mind straight. He lay with every sense keen and taut. Then the sound that he judged had awakened him came again.

There was a definite creaking outside the office door. The little wood stoop at the top of the stairs was groaning under some shifting weight. He knew it would be folly to lean back from the door and try to see who was apparently trying to look into the office through the door glass.

If he could see the man he would know who was after him. But they were all after him, as they likely had been after Loony. Bowie and Idaho had been after Loony. There could also be the big raw-boned deputy named Downs who had come into the bank with the sheriff that first day he had called on Colonel Ball.

Just which one of those it was didn't matter so much. Perhaps this man on the stair landing was the killer of Loony Tate, but whether he was or not, the whole crowd was equally guilty of Loony's death on all counts. Maybe they were taking turns at the killings. If Downs and Bowie had been the deputies who shot Blue Harmon with rifles, then perhaps either Sheriff Kruse or Idaho had killed Loony Tate, and the other one might be outside after Rod.

He thought of using his gun. He had it in his hand and he had rolled gently on his side, close to the doors. He had the muzzle of the gun pointed at the lower wood paneling of the door. It would be simple to start shooting, and out of the six shots, one or more should find the snooping individual outside.

But he gave that up almost the instant he thought of it. Colonel Ball would like nothing better than for a clear or even partial charge of murder to be lodged against him. Ball, in fact, would enjoy any sort of charge that would put Rod Gordon out of the way.

So he lay there like a rabbit hiding in a brush pile, and waited. Finally, he heard the soft boot soles tread the steps. The man was going down the stairs again.

He raised himself silently to have a look, but he saw only one shoulder of the man's back, then he was gone from sight.

Rod stayed there by his door until it was full daylight and there was plenty of movement about town. Then he folded the saddle blanket he had slept on and carefully laid it over the back of his desk chair.

HE hitched his guns to a more comfortable position on his hips and started down the steps. Lute Wormer came out of his shop and looked up the stairs.

"Well, say," he said. "You're about early, Rod." He smiled. "How's that hurt head of yours? Say, you got any notion who it was that beaned you with the rock?"

"Not yet," Rod said. "Does it matter?"

"Not so long as you got your head straight about the colonel and his gun rannies." He walked up the street away from his shop a few paces. "I hear you're fighting the colonel tooth and nail," he said in a lower tone.

"We're fighting him," Rod said. "You and me and anybody that stands for decency and justice."

"Now you're talking," Lute said. "Say, you know, it didn't seem right for you to be siding that colonel. I kept telling the boys that it wasn't like you to turn against us."

"We're having a meeting tonight about eight," Rod said. "We were going to hold it at Doc's house but now that I'm around and feeling stronger, we might as well get together upstairs in my office. Tell anybody interested to come, will you, Lute?"

Lute glanced at Rod's guns. "I sure will. Now we're going to get some place with a fighting man that knows the law."

"Sure hope so," Rod cut in, and left him to stride up the street to Doc Dixon's.

Doc looked wide-eyed at Rod as he came in. "We've been worried about you, Rod," Doc said. "If it hadn't been for spending most of the night with some of the boys trying to quiet Hack Midland and keep him from taking his scatter-gun to kill Colonel Ball I'd have got out a posse to look for you."

"I was all right," Rod said. "Just get these bandages off my head and I'll go down to Homer Helm's for breakfast."

Doc Dixon took off the bandages, examined the head wound.

"That's coming fine," he said. "Just don't do anything too violent and maybe you'll live."

"I won't if the colonel has his way," Rod said. He told him about the man with the rifle in the alley across the street and what else had happened during the night. "How's Hack Midland now?"

"We finally got him quieted down and early this morning he fell asleep from exhaustion. I came home to get a couple of winks. He's sure the colonel had his stable set on fire because he was leading the opposition. But now I can see how it served two purposes. Everybody went to the fire and left you hurt in my house and a clean target for whoever was to get you."

Rod grinned. "I wasn't such a clean target."

"You will be today if you move around," Doc said. "Even wearing your guns, you haven't got eyes in the back of your head."

"I don't think even the colonel's gunhands will take a chance on shooting me right in town. But I'll be careful."

"You'd better," Doc said. "A lot of solid citizens are counting on you and your knowledge of the law."

Rod looked down at his six-guns, and grinned.

XIV

THE time seemed right for Rod to make his first move, as he walked down the street in the warming morning sunshine. Colonel Ball and Idaho Vance had not yet arrived at the bank. He crossed the street and walked to the courthouse door. There he took out his right-hand gun and beat against the heavy front door until the long slab of plate glass rattled in its frame.

Through the glass, he saw a large man, with a heavy, broad face and thick iron-rimmed glasses peering at him. The man made a sweeping motion with his arm around to the bank next door.

Rod shook his head and pointed at the man inside. He holstered his gun and smiled.

"I've got to see you!" he called. "You're Daggert, the county clerk, aren't you?"

The man hesitated. He glanced at the wing from the bank that joined the courthouse. He seemed anxious and uncertain, as if he wished Colonel Ball were there to give him directions.

"It's you I want to see!" Rod called again.

Daggert came to the door. "What do you want?"

"You don't want me to shout it all over the town, do you?"

Daggert opened the door a crack. "We're closed for reconstruction and repair. Take your business to Colonel Ball at the bank."

"He's not there," Rod said. "And anyway, what I want to talk about concerns you. You can open the door at least wide enough so I don't have to shout like this."

Daggert opened the door a little wider. Wide enough for Rod to shove the toe of his boot in the crack.

The county clerk flushed angrily, leaned his weight against the door to close it, but Rod slapped himself against the door and knocked the man off-balance. He came in and casually turned to face the fellow.

"That's a lot better, Daggert," he said. "How long has this courthouse and hall of records been closed to the public?"

"We've been making repairs for—several months. Now, get out—before Colonel Ball arrives."

"As a matter of fact," Rod said, "I want to see the colonel, too, and I might as well see him here."

He strolled about, bent over one of the record books lying open on a high desk. There were ink and pens nearby. Daggert had apparently been entering some deeds. Rod picked up the deeds and glanced at them.

"Some more property the colonel's been taking over on tax deed. I'd like to look up some of this stuff in the tax records of that date. Let's see. This one was sold for taxes unpaid four, five and six years ago."

Daggert's face was dark and ugly. "Are—are you the—the new attorney in town?" he asked.

"Rod Gordon is the name. Let's see those tax records, quick. According to the laws of the state, they're supposed to be open at all times, during working hours, for the public view."

"I told you we've been closed for repairs."

"What repairs?"

"We're building a new system of bookkeeping and recording. There are some new shelves over there that are being built. Now, get out of here."

Rod saw the new wood in a row of incompleted shelves at the side of the main record hall. He walked over, whisked some dust off with a puff of his breath. "These haven't been worked on in days," he said accusingly.

"The carpenter has been sick."

"Where were the records taken?"

"They were taken out for safekeeping." Daggert glanced at the door leading to the bank.

"Maybe you've got them in the cellar where nobody can get at them," Rod said. He sauntered toward the cellar stairs. "I'll take a look for myself."

"Curse you!" Daggert said in sudden fury. "Get out of here or I'll get the sheriff, or one of his deputies. I should have kept a gun in here myself."

"Be thankful you didn't," Rod said. "You might have got in trouble." He started down the stairs. "If the colonel comes," he called back, "tell him I want to see him."

The cellar was damp and heavy with the smell of mold. The walls were of heavy stone. There were small windows, perhaps a foot wide and two feet long. Rod looked at the latch on one. It was an old-fashioned catch held to the window with two screws.

THERE were two storerooms at the other end. He lighted a match in each. In one was some broken furniture, and the other was empty.

There was a sudden commotion above. Colonel Ball's voice was booming and there was another voice with a flat tone to it.

"He's down in the cellar looking for tax records," Daggert said.

"Idaho," Colonel Ball's voice said, low, "go down and get him—and I don't care how."

Idaho's boots thumped the floor above. He came running down the stairs, barking:

"You, Gordon! What do you think you're—?"

The bark of Rod Gordon's left-hand gun punctured the broken end of Idaho's question. Idaho stumbled on the stairs and came staggering down, his hands held out. As he whirled to face Rod Gordon, Rod's right-hand gun bellowed.

The cellar was scarcely quiet of sound reverberation from the first shot when the second started a chain of deafening roars.

"What you doing to my guns?" Idaho bellowed.

"Just putting them out of commission before you start showing off," Rod said.

Idaho Vance stood before him, staring down at first one of his guns, then the other. They were still in their holsters but hanging by what was left of the torn leather. One gun was shattered at the frame, and the barrel of the other one seemed kinked.

There was a little blood on Idaho's pants where one of Rod's bullets had ricochetted and nicked Idaho's leg.

"What's going on down there? Did you get him, Idaho?"

"Yeah," Rod said. "He got me. We'll be up directly."

"You ruint my guns!" Idaho groaned. Then that flat, cold, dead-fish look came back in his eyes as his fear left him and anger came in its place. "I'll get you for this, if it's the last thing I ever tackle! You wouldn't dare draw facing me."

"I'll give you warning if I ever shoot to kill," Rod said. "Now get upstairs."

Idaho climbed the steps, glaring down at his shattered guns.

Colonel Ball was at the head of the stairs.

"What a sick-looking, gun-throwing rabbit you turned out to be, Idaho," he said. Glaring past the guard down the stairs, he reached for his shoulder gun.

"Hold it right there," Rod said. "If I shoot up *your* gun in its holster, Colonel, you're going to catch a little lead around your heart. Now, you raise your hands high and back off, because we're coming up no matter what you want."

The colonel rumbled a curse and backed off. Idaho, then Rod Gordon came up into the courthouse. A door swung wide from the bank wing and Sheriff Kruse rushed in with raw-boned Deputy Downs.

"Drop that gun, Gordon!" Kruse yelled.

Rod laughed. Kruse had both guns leveled at Rod Gordon.

"Go ahead and shoot," Rod said. "But let me warn you first. My finger's tight on the trigger. The sudden muscular contraction of getting shot would make me pull the trigger the rest of the way and you wouldn't want the colonel to die like that. Or would you?"

"Don't be a fool!" Colonel Ball said sharply. "Put up your guns, Sheriff. Let Gordon go—for now."

"Thanks, Colonel," Rod said. "And thanks for not coming down too early this morning."

"What do you mean?"

"It gave me time to look around for those tax records that have turned up missing. The records that might tell about taxes being paid on a lot of the property you've bought at fraudulent tax sale."

"Any tax deeds that I've bought," Colonel Ball roared, "are for property showing delinquent taxes on the records! I defy you to prove otherwise!"

"If some of your gun galoots don't drop me with a bullet before I get to it, I certainly mean to try to prove it, when I find the back tax records," Rod said. "I've got a hunch those records are around somewhere. You wouldn't dare destroy public records because you'd run into laws bigger than your local setup here." Rod took a step toward the front door. "Anyway," he added, "I've made sure the missing tax records are not hidden in this building. Now I can concentrate in other directions."

He couldn't seem to help a quick glance toward the bank.

A CROWD, drawn by the sound of gunshots, had gathered before the bank and the courthouse. Rod walked easily toward the courthouse door, paused to glance back at the angry faces.

"Better get that nicked leg over to have Doc Dixon look at it, Idaho," he said. "And I hope you find a gunsmith that can do something with those guns of yours."

"I'll get you!" Idaho said vengefully.

"Maybe so," Rod said. "Keep trying and we'll see." He paused suddenly, staring at Idaho. The colonel's bodyguard had his hat off, mopping the sweat from his face with a red handkerchief. It was the first time Rod had noticed Idaho without his hat. He had a peculiarly flat top to his long, thin head. It reminded Rod of the top of the head of the man who had been in the alley sighting at him over a rifle barrel.

"Idaho," Rod said, "you mighty near did get me last night when everybody was running to the fire."

Idaho's pale gray eyes moved slightly as if a blow on the chin had jarred him. They jerked in the direction of Colonel Ball.

The colonel glared at Idaho. His eyes seemed to be saying, "You little fool! How did you give yourself away?" Then the colonel spoke. He said, "What's Gordon talking about, Idaho?"

Idaho frowned, opened his mouth but closed it again.

"I'll pretend you didn't know anything about it, Colonel," Rod said. "And I'll tell it loud enough for the audience at the doors and windows to hear. When the fire started last night at the livery stable, Doc Dixon and Mrs. Dixon and I went to the front door, and the doctor and his wife hurried off. I was not dressed, so I stayed behind. Across the street I made out the head and shoulders of a man lying in the alley between the saddlery and the Bon Ton. He was aiming a rifle at me, but waiting until the doctor and his wife were clear, before shooting me."

"What's that got to do with Idaho Vance?" Colonel Ball roared.

"Well," Rod said, "it just happens that Idaho has the same flat shape to the top of his head as the head of the owlhoot in the alley last night."

Colonel Ball flushed and turned on his guard. "Confound you, Idaho!" he yelled. "I hired you as a bank guard, and I told you I'd stand for no trigger tactics on the side. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"He's lying," Idaho growled. "I was down to the Bonanza playing pool in the back room when the fire started. Ask the sheriff and Bowie. They was with me."

Rod laughed. "You've got your alibi all rigged haven't you, Idaho? Well, it doesn't make any difference."

"Who says it don't!" Hack Midland's voice roared from the open door leading to the bank.

Hack stood there with bloodshot eyes wild and his gaunt face pale. He had a ten-gauge shotgun in his great bony hands. Both hammers were cocked back and his fingers were tight on the triggers, covering the sheriff and the others.

"My place was burned last night out of spite because I dared to take sides against that stuffed goose they call Colonel Ball!" he shouted. "I'm cleaned out and half my stock was destroyed in the fire. Nothing matters to me except to get even. That's what I'm aiming to do right now!"

There was an angry rumble from the mob outside.

"Kill the thieving son!" a man's voice shouted from the street.

"That's what I'm aiming to do!" Hack Midland called back. "But there's some other justice to be dispensed first." He half-swung his shotgun at the sheriff. "Arrest Idaho Vance for setting fire to my stable and for shooting Loony Tate!"

Rod Gordon was trying to move closer to Midland.

"Sounds like a good idea, Hack," he said. "Have you got proof of these things you're charging?"

"Don't need proof," Hack said, "any more than I've heard right here and what I know has happened in the past."

Sheriff Kruse was standing ready to draw, his legs wide, hands out at the sides. His eyes were shifting between the shotgun and the moves of Rod Gordon.

The deputy sagged a little at the side of the sheriff. He looked as if he couldn't decide what to do, but was ready to follow the sheriff's lead.

"In that case," Rod said, "we'd better talk a little more, Hack."

"Don't you try to stop what I'm ready to do, Rod!" Hack said. "My life ain't worth much now, and my mind's made up."

"I was just going to collect the other guns," Rod Gordon said. "Then there won't be any hurry. Keep 'em covered, Hack."

Hack Midland nodded. "Don't you worry about me not keeping 'em covered, Rod."

XV

GORDON went to work with speed and certainty. He picked the colonel's gun from the shoulder holster, then slipped behind the sheriff and his deputy and lifted their guns.

"Idaho won't shoot much but himself with his beat-up iron," he said, as he laid the guns on the nearest table. "Now we can talk without getting jumpy. What kind of proof did you say you had, Hack?"

"I was saying, about the burning of my place and the shooting of Loony Tate. As I came in you said Idaho had himself a good alibi all figured out ahead. And you said you recognized him last night trying to kill you. S-o-o-o—"

"I'm afraid," Rod said, "that's not enough proof for arrest. I believe he was the one who was aiming at me last night, but there might be other men with flat tops to their heads."

Somebody let the air out of his lungs. He thought it was Idaho.

"You mean you don't figure I ought to make the sheriff arrest him?" Hack demanded.

"There isn't proof enough," Rod said. "Figure how long Idaho would stay in jail if our public benefactor, Colonel Ball, ordered him let out."

"I resent that implication," Colonel Ball roared.

Rod bowed. "That's your privilege."

"That's his last privilege," Hack barked. "You're not going to stall me no longer. That's all people have been trying to do since last night—trying to keep me from killing the cussed colonel."

As Hack pointed the shotgun at Colonel Ball's heart, Rod leaped for the gun.

There was a wild blast of both barrels. Glass in one front window shattered. A woman on the street screamed. The colonel stood motionless as a statue, though his hair had been ruffled by the blast.

Rod was trying to get the shotgun away from Hack Midland.

"You young fool!" Hack roared. "What'd you want to throw up the gun for just as I fired?"

"You can't shoot an unarmed man," Rod said. He got the gun away and started him for the door. "Let's get out of here."

Half a dozen citizens had crowded into the courthouse entrance now. They moved along with the two men.

The colonel was shaking.

"Thank you, Gordon. I'm—grateful."

"You'll get over it," Rod said, and went out.

In the street, the crowd milled about Rod Gordon and Hack Midland. Some seemed disappointed that the colonel was still alive.

"That would have just started the shooting," Rod said. "Before it was over we'd had blood all over the courthouse and the boardwalk."

He moved Hack Midland on up toward Doc Dixon's place.

"And besides every other reason, Hack," he said, "I had to save you because I need your help."

That halted Hack's grumbling.

At the doctor's house Rod, Hack and Doc sat down in the office and lit up smokes.

"Hack," Doc said, "you still got your health and can make another start. You did have some insurance, you told me."

Hack's expression became agonized. "It ain't the money! It's hearing them horses of mine screaming as they burned and knowing that colonel devil, swelling around our town, is to blame for everything that's gone wrong here since he came. It—it's everything coming to a head and—"

He held out his hands in desperation. Tears started to his sad eyes and ran down his cheeks, then he bent over and buried his face in his great hands and sobbed. . . .

DURING the afternoon Rod Gordon rode about the country asking people to come to the meeting at his office that night.

"Come fully armed," he said, "but don't shoot unless you have to." And each time he could see the startled shock in each face except Webster Fremont's. The former owner of the Lazy F just blinked his sad, hound-dog eyes and nodded solemnly.

Rod had taken Hack Midland with him, to make sure that Hack didn't get into trouble. They came riding back to town from the shack Web Fremont had holed up in after his dispossession, and Rod said:

"You've been wondering what I wanted you to help me with, Hack. This is it. Colonel Ball's going to try to have a bullet put into me the first chance he gets, but he'll play as safe as he dares."

"That devil!" Hack snorted. "Notice how he turned on Idaho just like he hadn't ordered him to kill you?"

"He did the same thing to Sheriff Kruse for my benefit the night I was up at his house for dinner. That act turned me sort of inside out. He put on a better act with Idaho."

"Had a bigger audience," Hack said.

They rode on in silence, then Hack asked:

"What you goin' to tell the boys at this meetin' tonight?"

"I thought we'd talk over the situation," Rod said, "and see what everybody thinks would be best to do."

"About killing the colonel?"

"Will you try to forget that for now, Hack?"

"I'll never forget it," Hack said savagely. "When I think of them horses screaming—" He shuddered. "Seems I'll always hear that little yellow mare of mine shrieking her head off as she burned."

"Stop talking about it!" Rod said sharply. "The colonel most likely will die at the end of this job we're working on. Just you try to stay out of jail and on the right side of the law so we can get on with our business."

They rode into town in the late afternoon, and Rod went to the barber shop and turned Hack Midland over to Lute Wormer.

"See this crazy galoot don't go shooting up the town with that shotgun of his, will you, Lute?"

"I don't know," Lute said earnestly. "You shouldn't ought to turn him over to me. I only wish he'd blowed Colonel Ball's head off this morning."

"You've got company, feeling that way," Rod said.

"Company," Hack snorted. "Near everybody that's talked to me since this morning said the same thing."

"Sure," Rod said. "And you'd been a hero. A dead one. If you'd got the colonel, Sheriff Kruse would have piled in with his deputy and Idaho. They'd have grabbed guns and you would have had a lot of dead company." He nodded to Lute. "Cut his hair and shave him up neat and clean. I want him and all of the rest looking neat for the meeting.

Rod Gordon left the barber shop and strolled up the street, with his guns so he could get at them if need be.

He wandered along to the county courthouse and past the bank. He saw that a lamp was burning at the back of the bank.

At the corner he paused with his back to a brick column of the bank, took out pouch and papers and rolled himself a cigarette. Lighting it, he lingered to smoke and his eyes took in everything in sight. The drug store was on the opposite corner, and Jim Colton's wife, upstairs where the druggist lived, moved the curtains back and looked out at him. She was one of perhaps a dozen men and women who watched him, wondering what he would do.

He turned and walked down toward the newspaper office. Through the front window he could see Waldo Stone working at his desk.

Rod tapped on the window, saw Waldo jump and turn to stare. Rod opened the door and went in, grinning.

"What's got you jumpy, Waldo?"

"Don't tap on a man's window like that," Waldo said nervously. His face was paler, as he got up out of his swivel desk chair and put his hands on the desk top.

"I don't know what you're trying to do to this town, Rod. But you've suddenly got it split down the middle. Some are taking sides with you. Some are taking Colonel Ball's side."

ROD stood smiling at him, feet wide, hands on his hips.

"Who do you think you'll side, Waldo?"

Stone glanced out in his composing room where a printer was still at work.

"You, of course, Rod. I told you that, didn't I?"

"Well, sure," Rod said easily. "But things have been changing so fast of late I just wanted to be sure."

"What did you expect I'd do—welch on you?" Waldo asked.

"Of course not," Rod said. He chuckled. "I just stopped by to tell you that those who want to get together against Colonel Ball and his tactics are meeting in my office tonight at eight. We'll be glad to have you come down." Rod lowered his voice. "Of course, there may be some things brought up that you wouldn't want in your paper." He sauntered toward the door. "See you tonight about eight."

"Right," Waldo said.

Rod Gordon closed the door behind him and walked back to the drug store where he sat down on one of the stools at the ice cream fountain.

"A glass of sarsaparilla, Jim," he said.

There were other customers in the store.

"Just a minute, Rod," Jim Colton said, "till I wait on the customers ahead of you."

Rod rolled another cigarette and waited. The other customers left, one by one, and Rod was alone with the proprietor.

Colton came over, looking troubled. "Rod, I can't afford to take chances of getting mixed up in this fight you've got started," he protested. "I told the other boys—"

"Did I say anything about asking you to get into trouble?"

"No, but you—"

"It's been a hot day," Rod said. "I came in for a cold drink."

"Sure," Colton said and made the herb drink he'd asked for. "But I just wanted you to understand. I'd like to help you, though. But my wife hasn't been well and she may have to be sent East for an operation and I just can't afford to—"

"The matter I had on my mind wasn't much for you to do," Rod said. "Just sit in your window upstairs and watch what goes on at the bank. That was all I had in mind."

Jim hesitated. "I'd sure like to help. I hear the talk in here, how some folks is scared and some is going to get behind you with everything they got to see we folks in town get square dealing. But I honestly can't help right now. Fact is, I'm in pretty deep at the bank, putting in extra stock for the town to grow to and making the drug store over and—"

A board creaked back of the prescription wall. Jim Colton jerked his head around, then relaxed.

"Who is it?" Rod asked.

"My wife," Jim said, low-voiced. "I hope she hasn't heard. I don't want to get her upset."

Mrs. Colton appeared in the prescription department doorway. She was a tall, thin woman with dark rings about her eyes and a worried, tense look.

"I think we should help, Jim," she said firmly. "I'd feel a lot easier to get this whole thing settled. I've seen this coming, sitting in my window upstairs. I've seen people go to the bank and come out looking lost and discouraged. I've seen them trying to get into the courthouse to see the records, and they couldn't!"

"Mattie," Jim said, "you shouldn't excite yourself."

"Nonsense," she said. "It's time we did something. This is our community. We came here after we married and we've prospered." She turned to Rod. "If there's something we can do, we'll—"

"We can't afford to get mixed up in this," Jim still objected.

"Fiddlesticks," she said. "What must I watch for, Rod?"

"I wouldn't think of imposing on you, Mrs. Colton," he said.

"I don't sleep well at night anyway," she told him. "Many times I get up and sit by the window. Watching for something special will take my mind off myself."

"Thanks just the same, Mrs. Colton, but I wouldn't think of it."

"Nothing's going to happen to me," she persisted. "All you've got to do is tell me what to watch for. And when I don't feel like watching, I'll have Jim sit there in my place."

Rod hesitated.

"If you don't tell me," she said, using a woman's persuasion, "I'll likely have a fit of nerves wondering what it is."

JIM sighed. "You better tell her, Rod, She's set her mind on it."

"It concerns the tax records for past years, Mrs. Colton," Rod told her frankly then. "They've disappeared, and I believe they're stored in the back of the bank vault. They may be moved at any time now."

"And you want to know about that?"

"I've got to be sure what becomes of them," Rod said. "I mean if those records are removed from the bank vault, I want to know that and I want to know where they've been taken."

"You expect they'd be taken out at night?" Mrs. Colton asked.

"I'm sure they'd be moved at night. So there would be some light to work by and you could see what direction the men take if they do move them."

"I'll be glad to do all I can to help," she said.

"I'm sure everybody will be grateful to you when it comes out," Rod said thankfully, and finished his sarsaparilla. "As soon as anything happens we'd appreciate it if you'd send Jim up through the back yard to Doc Dixon's house with a prescription. He can tell Doc what's going on."

"Rod, I wish you wouldn't get us mixed up in this," Jim Colton said mournfully.

"Now, you hush up, Jim," Mrs. Colton said. "You've always been too much on the careful side. La Mesa has done a lot for us and I think this once we can do something for La Mesa."

Jim sighed. "Well, maybe you're right." He looked at Rod. "Anyway, we'll do it for you."

"Thanks," Rod said. He paid for his drink and went out.

XVI

BY as early as seven o'clock that night the anti-Ball forces began arriving in Rod Gordon's small law office. They came singly and in twos and threes. They came armed and grim-faced and tense. There were bulging jaw muscles and tight lips and short nods as they greeted each other.

Hack Midland and Webster Fremont stood at the top of the stairs to look over the men as they came in. They passed them, one after another.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Waldo Stone arrived. Hack Midland came in from the landing to speak to Rod, seated at his desk.

"Rod, Waldo Stone's outside and says you asked him to come."

"I did," Rod said.

"Now wait a minute," protested Hack. "He'll splash this all over that paper of his."

"Maybe that's what I want him to do," Rod said quietly. "Let him in."

Ike Crandall came up and leaned his gnarled hands on the desk. "Rod," he declared flatly, "Waldo Stone ain't in the right company here."

"I resent that," Stone called from the door and brushed past Web Fremont who trailed behind him, a gun in his hand. "Rod, I told you this afternoon how I felt," Waldo said.

"Sure," Rod said. "And I invited you to this meeting. As a matter of fact, I appoint you clerk, Waldo. You can take notes of what goes on."

"By Harry," Hack Midland said to Stone threateningly, "if you print a line Rod don't want you to, I'll—"

"You and Fremont are leaving the door unguarded," Rod told Hack.

There were a few more late arrivals, then Rod Gordon called the meeting to order. He reminded them of why they were assembled—something they all knew only too well, having lost ranches or other property through Colonel Ball's manipulations—and that they must plan what could be done about it. In the discussions which followed suggestions were made which ranged from open war to calling on the cavalry.

"It's not easy to call in outside forces on a matter like this," Rod said. "In the first place it would take more than the say-so of a town lawyer and a handful of angry citizens to get state or Federal authorities to come in and make an inspection for fraud. What is done will have to be done by us. If we can turn up definite evidence of fraud, I can take the matter to the proper higher authorities to put a stop to it."

"Well, like I said," Hack Midland put in. "I've lost my business and my stock, lost everything but my self-respect, so what I say is we go take Colonel Ball out and hang him."

There was a rumble of agreement.

Rod shook his head. "A lot of you men would be killed before we ever got within rope length of the colonel. All the guards he's got will be staying near him from now on. No, men. If I'm going to have anything to do with this, we'll stick as close to the law as we can." He coughed. "In the one matter I have in mind, it may seem that we're going to overstep the bounds of the law somewhat. But when I get through telling you the plan, I think you'll see that the move will be right."

There was silence in the smoke-filled room. A breath of wind came in the windows and the smoke moved sluggishly, like muddy water in a shallow river.

Boots shuffled restlessly on the floor. There was a low murmur of voices.

"What's this plan you got up your sleeve, Rod?" Owen Bryce, the hardware store owner, asked.

"I'm telling only those who are willing to face death, perhaps, with me," Rod said. "I'm calling for volunteers. If we're caught red-handed, if news of this plan leaks out, we're dead pigeons."

He ran his eyes over the room and repeated: "I'm asking for volunteers."

THERE was an instant hum of voices.

"Well," one voice said, "I'll help, but I didn't figure to have to chance dying. I got a wife and five kids."

"I don't know about this," another man said. "Me and the family got a rough time getting along since we lost the ranch, but it's better than dying."

"I don't want anyone with heavy responsibilities," Rod said. "Maybe we'd better limit this to men without wives and children. Anyone, let's say, like Waldo Stone here. You'll go along with us, I know, Waldo. You told me so, didn't you?" He looked from the pale face of the newspaperman to other faces. "All you men with wives or children or both, you're excused. It'll be up to us single, unattached men to do this job. And it isn't going to be easy."

Older men began mumbling apologies. There was a steady clumping of boots as they went down the stairs.

"I'm sticking," Hack Midland said, "till Hades sears over. I got no woman nor kids. I got no horses. I—"

"Fine, Hack. That makes two—you and Waldo."

Waldo Stone opened his mouth. "I—" he began.

"I've got a special job for you, Waldo," Rod said. "You won't even have to carry a gun."

Waldo relaxed, some of his color returning.

Two young rannies wearing guns gave Rod their nod. "We're staying," one of them said. "We're the Lathrop boys. I'm Tom and this is Ed, my brother."

Rod frowned. "I read about your father, didn't I, about two or three months ago? I was sorry to hear of his death."

"He shot himself," Tom said. "Losing the ranch kind of locoed him."

"Glad to have you with us," Rod said. "Who else is staying?"

"I'm no good with six-guns," Lute Wormer said. "But I can pick out a gopher's eye at thirty paces with a Winchester."

"Fine," Rod repeated. "Who else?"

Bump Yost hitched an old six-gun on his right hip and stepped up beside Hack Midland.

"I got no job nor nothing," he said, "and they kilt my friend, Loony. I'll help give 'em what they got a'comin'."

"Thanks, Bump."

Sam Redman, the massive-chested blacksmith came up to the desk.

"I got a woman, but she'd beat the blue blazes out of me and call me a yellow snake if I didn't go with you boys wherever you're going."

"We'd rather not have anybody married, Sam."

"I tell you I'll catch it if you don't let me join," Sam said desperately. "Molly'll go along, too, if there's any place for a woman that can use a shotgun good as any man."

"All right," Rod said. "But we won't have to use your wife. Though she might come in handy with her shotgun at that." He looked about the room. No one was left except the volunteers. Rod closed the door, locked it, and came back to his desk. "Now, here's the plan."

Seven men stood before him, the sweat beginning to run down inside their shirt collars.

"We've got to get the tax records of past years in order to clear a lot of the properties the colonel has taken over. I'm pretty sure I caught a glimpse of them stacked at the back end of the bank vault, the other day."

"It wouldn't do you any good to try to break into the bank and open the safe," Waldo Stone said. "It's the newest type door and lock, and I don't think there are any safecrackers among us."

"That wasn't what I had in mind," Rod said. "We're going to stage a daylight bank holdup."

The smoky air in the room seemed to go dead with the tense stillness.

"This won't be an ordinary holdup," Rod went on. "We won't take any cash—just the records, and get on out of there. We'll wear no masks, so when the job is done we won't be able to show ourselves in town again until we can get those records to the capitol and get the help we need to clear up these frauds."

"Suppose we find the records show that there is tax delinquency?" Waldo Stone asked. "What happens then?"

Rod half-smiled at Waldo. "In that case, we tried and failed. Apparently, you're the only one who's really got anything to lose, Waldo. The rest of us can go somewhere else and start again."

SILENCE again, then Ed Lathrop said, "It wouldn't make no difference to us. We ain't even got a start here, with the bank taking away the ranch."

"I thought you said you were going to stay within the law, Rod?" Stone said.

"In a way we are," Rod said. "It's the law that county records are to be open for public inspection. We'll just take them out of hiding and open them to public use—after we've checked on the cases we're interested in."

Waldo shook his head. "I'm afraid, gentlemen—"

Hack Midland leaped at him, caught him by the lapels of his coat and yanked him close to his big, cocked fist. "You're not backing out now, Stone. You're not going to Colonel Ball to tell him what's coming off. You stayed to hear and you'll be in on the holdup, win, lose or draw."

"Now wait a minute," Waldo protested.

"Let him go," Rod said. "He won't tell Colonel Ball."

"He'd better not," Sam Redman growled.

"I'm sorry to hear you won't be with us," Rod said. "I had you picked for the driver of the wagon that would cart away the records."

Hard eyes were glaring at Stone. He licked his lips.

"I'm sorry, too," he said. "I'm more than sorry, but as you said, Rod, I've got a lot to lose here. And without masks to protect our identity—"

"It's all right," Rod said. "We understand, Waldo. Now, you, Bump Yost. I think I'll make you and Lute Wormer lookout men. You'll each have a shotgun and stand on either side of the front door of the bank. Blast anybody that makes a sign they're going to interfere."

Rod flashed his eyes on the blacksmith. "Sam, you're strong, and so are you, Hack. I think—" He hesitated. "Blast it, Waldo! I'm sorry you're not going to be there to drive the wagon."

"I'm not much at handling a team, anyway," Waldo said nervously.

"Well, maybe it's just as well at that," Rod said. "Still I needed you to make it an even eight. Say, Sam, you said your woman might help. You suppose she—" Rod broke off, shook his head.

"Sure she'd help," Sam said. "You want her to drive the wagon? She'd like that. She could have the shotgun right alongside of her on the seat, and I'm telling you, she can use it, too."

"No," Rod said. "We'll just have to get along as we are. That'd be too much, asking Mrs. Redman to drive for a holdup. We'll figure it out."

"Rod," Hack said earnestly, "there ain't nobody can get any more out of horses than I can. Ain't you forgetting that was my business up to—" His face darkened and he choked up.

"Why, that's right," Rod said. "You could handle the team and maybe help carry out the records, too."

"What are you going to do about the actual holdup?" Lute Wormer asked.

"I was figuring it would take a flock of us to take care of it right. While you and Bump Yost stand outside with your shotguns, Sam Redman and the Lathrop boys and I will go inside, draw guns, and take over. Then, while one of the Lathrop boys and I keep everybody there covered, the rest of you can start carrying the records out of the vault to the wagon in the street."

BOTH the Lathrop boys looked eager. Tom, the taller of the two, moved in closer. "We going to bust in drawin' our guns, and start shootin' just like that?"

"No," Rod said. "We'll want to move in easy and take Colonel Ball and everybody by surprise. Have you boys got bank accounts in that bank?"

"I got a few bucks in there I been trying to save," Ed said.

"Then you'll drift in together, and you, Ed, can be making out a deposit slip at the desk against the wall. You'll be having trouble making the writing just so. Tom, you'll be making a cigarette, but taking your time. Lute Wormer, you and Bump will come strolling up the street from the barber shop with your shotguns as if you're on your way up Juniper Creek rabbit hunting. Stall around the entrance to the bank getting lights for your smokes before you go on.

"Hack Midland, you'll come driving the team around the corner from the back street. Folks are so used to seeing you do such things they'll forget for the minute your place is burned, or they'll figure you're doing business, anyway. Sam Redman, you'll be riding in the wagon, sitting in the back with your legs hanging out. You'll be leading our getaway horses, only they'll be tied to the back of the wagon, so when you get off the wagon, they'll stay there waiting for us."

"Ed and me, we can furnish the horses," Tom Lathrop said. "We got horses, but that's about all we have got left after the bank took over Pa."

"We got the horses, then," Rod said. He looked about, his lips pursed as if in deep thought. "I guess that works out the whole thing," he decided. "We may want to get in some practice, and then we may decide to pull this holdup real soon. We'll see how things turn out tomorrow morning." He looked at Waldo. "I'm mighty sorry you won't be with us, Waldo. It'd be an experience you wouldn't forget the rest of your life."

Waldo cleared his throat. "I don't doubt it."

"You see, all you'd have to do is drive the wagon. If you were the one doing that, you'd just drive up and stay there, then drive off when we got you loaded."

"You know," Waldo admitted, "I feel like an eavesdropper listening to this whole plan in which I can't participate. I'm mighty sorry I can't drive that wagon for you." He repeated: "As you said yourself, Rod, I've got more at stake than any of the rest of you."

"What do you mean?" Sam Redman demanded. "I got my neck I'm throwing into this business and that's worth more than any yellow newspaper business."

"I didn't mean it that way," Waldo said. "I meant—"

"We understand," Rod said.

Waldo looked into the threatening faces about him. "I'll be going along, then, if you'll excuse me."

"Go on, then," Hack barked. "I tried to keep you out in the first place. First thing we know, you'll be running to the sheriff and the colonel with your mouth flapping and they'll know just how we plan this holdup."

"Don't worry about that," Waldo said, shaking his head vigorously. "I wouldn't say a word about this."

"You're plumb right you wouldn't," Hack said. He swung around to face Waldo and glared down at the smaller man in his dapper garb. "If you let out so much as a hint about any of this—"

"Waldo won't say anything," Rod said, rising. "He promised he wouldn't. Come on and I'll let you out, Waldo."

XVII

UNLOCKING the door Rod let Waldo Stone out, and they heard the editor go lightly down the steps.

Rod went back to his desk and Hack faced him, his expression thunderous. "Have you gone loco, Rod?" he demanded in a low voice. "That buzzard will go straight to Colonel Ball and tell him the whole thing."

"Frankly," Rod said, "I don't care too much if he does. It may make things a little tougher for us but meantime we'll drive the colonel crazy with suspense." He looked over the faces of the men before him. "We'll get in a little practice beginning tomorrow morning. Hack, you and Sam won't bring the horses around. That won't happen until we get closer to the real thing. But Bump, you and Lute can take your shotguns and go rabbit hunting and stop at the bank entrance to light your smokes. You Lathrop boys, do a little business at the bank. Draw out a dollar or two or deposit it. Hang around a little. I'll stroll in and make a few inquiries and stop to talk with you boys. We'll worry that colonel to death—and I have an idea he may have more than some of you think to worry about. I've got a hunch he's got some books in that vault, concerning his bank business, that he'd be more afraid of having stolen than the tax records."

"You mean," Lute Wormer demanded, "you think he ain't even running the bank on the level?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. I've a hunch that Colonel Ball is running close to the margin and using the people's deposits to buy up property all over this county on his own account."

"That double-thieving snake!" Hack Midland growled. "Using *my* money to hire firebugs to burn down my stable!"

"I'm not sure, of course," Rod said. "As I said, it's just a hunch, and we won't know until we can get hold of those records. Now, you all better go turn in, and tomorrow morning at ten we'll try out this plan. But no shooting, remember. We'll just go about our business and pay no attention to anybody else."

They went outside together and down the stairs. The Lathrop boys got on their horses at the rack and rode up the quiet street.

Rod walked down the board walk with some of the others. He turned in at the second alley almost before they realized it and was gone from sight.

He came around behind the hotel, climbed up the tree beside the flat-roofed kitchen wing and crept along the roof in his stocking feet to the open window of his room. For a long time he crouched there beside the window, listening for any sound inside the room. When he was satisfied that no one was there waiting for him, he went in, closed the window, locked it and drew the shade.

The bed stood in the far corner of the room. He slipped the pad mattress off and put it on the floor directly under the window. Then he turned in for some sleep.

But others were not sleeping. At that moment Colonel Ball, pale and anxious-eyed, was walking the thick rose-hued carpet of his living room. Idaho was standing over in a corner practicing his draw with a new pair of guns. He kept flipping the guns from their new holsters, twirling them in his hands to get the feel, then catching them as if to fire both. The guns made small clicking sounds as he worked with them.

Colonel Ball turned on him. "Stop twirling those guns!" he commanded. "You make me nervous, Idaho."

Sheriff Kruse had been more at ease with his boss of late than previously, as if he had for the first time discovered that the man had weaknesses. Kruse sat in one of the horsehair, flare-back easy chairs, a turkey leg in his right hand and a bottle of beer in the other.

"Why don't you sit down, Colonel?" he said. He motioned with the turkey leg toward the chair next to him. "Sitting down you can relax."

"Don't tell me what to do!" the colonel snarled.

The two deputies were leaning against the wall waiting for any orders the sheriff might give them.

"If you ask me—" Sheriff Kruse said.

"I didn't!" the colonel snapped. "Let me think this thing out." He turned, scowling. "Where's Judge Anders? He ought to know whether there's a law against public meetings without license."

"That's one law you forgot to get passed, I guess," Idaho said, and flipped out his new guns again.

THE colonel fumed.

"Why do you bother with laws now?" Kruse said. "You're up against a tough man and you can't be too fussy. We got to get rid of him and quick before he works up the whole county against us."

"That's just the reason we've got to move cautiously," Ball said. "Public opinion has got to be served. There are more new people in this town now than there were original settlers when we came here. Waldo Stone has been keeping us in a good light in his paper, so we can't afford to turn them against us now."

"From what I heard," Bowie growled, "you'd ought to have let Sheriff Kruse finish off this Gordon in the courthouse."

Colonel Ball turned his glare on Bowie. This was the first time that gunslick deputy had grown bold enough to offer any ideas.

"When I want your opinion, Bowie, I'll ask for it," the colonel said coldly.

Bowie shrugged his hulking shoulders. "Just sounds loco, not killing him when there was an excuse."

"I just said public opinion had to be

looked out for!" the colonel roared. "There was a crowd before the courthouse and the bank and most of them were new folks."

Sheriff Kruse paused from gnawing on his turkey leg. "The colonel was under Gordon's guns. He was scared of getting shot—naturally."

"Naturally," Colonel Ball said. He suddenly felt that he was standing with his back to the wall, with his hirelings against him. He felt his face grow hot with the rush of angry blood. "Blast it! I'll tell you what to do, all of you, and when to do it."

"That's what we're waiting for," Idaho said. "But I got about enough of you yelling at me in front of folks, calling me names."

"I can't have people thinking I'd send my men out to gun down enemies of mine!" Colonel Ball said desperately.

"Just don't do it again," Idaho said. "I won't take it more'n once and you've had that one time."

Sheriff Kruse finished his turkey leg and laid the bone on a saucer on the table. He swallowed the last of the beer, put the bottle on the floor, and got up.

"While we're talking about this act you and I played for Rod Gordon, Colonel, with you blaming me for what goes on," he said, "I might as well tell you I don't like it. It's embarrassing, so don't try it again."

"About tonight," Colonel Ball said hastily. He glanced at the stairs and lowered his voice. "Gordon's got to go, and this time make sure. Idaho, you messed up that shooting from the alley inexcusably, and I don't want it to happen again."

"How would I know the fire was lighting up the alley behind me so Gordon could see me?"

"You're supposed to know what you're doing," said Colonel Ball. "Now about Gordon tonight. Bowie, you go down and hide back of the barber shop. Watch Gordon when he comes out of the meeting and follow him. And get him! I don't want him talking in the public square tomorrow morning about what happened to him, do you understand?"

"You don't have to yell at me," Bowie said. "I hear you."

"Idaho, you and the sheriff stay here with me tonight. No telling what some of those angry citizens may try. We'll wait and see what Stone has to report when the meeting is over."

A knock came at the back door. Then a low voice spoke through the open window beside Idaho. Deputy Downs' face appeared at the window.

"Waldo Stone just got here," he said. "I told him to go around to the back door.

The colonel hurried to the back door.

"I hope nobody saw me come here," Waldo Stone said as he came into the kitchen. "Colonel, I'm in a lot of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I've heard all the plans for a bank holdup and they know that I know the plans. I know what each of seven men plan to do when they hold up the bank."

"Calm down, Waldo, and get it straight," the colonel said.

SHERIFF KRUSE and Idaho and Bowie sauntered back into the kitchen to listen.

"Colonel," Waldo said, "if they ever find out I carried this information to you my life won't be worth—"

Idaho made a flat laughing sound. "I never figured it was worth much from the start."

"Shut up, Idaho," Kruse said. "What about this holdup of the bank?"

Waldo told what he had heard. "The only trouble is, I couldn't find out what day they'll try this holdup."

Colonel Ball shook his head. "The exact time doesn't matter. It will be within the next two or three days likely."

"I think so." Waldo nodded. "Gordon seems sure those records are in the bank vault."

"Don't open the vault," Kruse said.

"Stop talking nonsense," Colonel Ball snapped. "We have to go into that vault a hundred times a day."

"I was thinking," Waldo said. "You have been wanting to get rid of Rod

Gordon. Now that you know there's going to be a holdup and he'll be the leader, it seems to me you could just go and take him. And the rest of his gang."

A smile played around the colonel's mouth. He shook his head.

"That won't be necessary," he said. "Besides, it might look like a trumped-up job. People already suspect I set you up in your new newspaper office and they wouldn't believe anything you said." He laughed briefly. "No, we won't have to take Rod Gordon now. We'll just let him come to us and we'll have Boot Hill all ready for him and some of the hotheads backing him. Fire wasn't enough warning for Hack Midland. So we'll see how he'll like hot lead."

"Well," Bowie said, "I'll get started now. Gordon's room in the hotel is Seventeen and all I got to do is—"

"What are you talking about, you lumbering fool?" Colonel Ball exploded. "I said we'd wait for Rod Gordon to come to us. There isn't a man or woman in the world who could blame us for shooting down a bunch of bank robbers."

Waldo hesitated. "Is Maxine in?"

"She's up in her room," the colonel said. "I'll tell her you're down here."

He went to the stairs door and opened it to call. But Maxine, in street clothes, already stood there, her eyes cold as chips of ice.

"Maxine!" the colonel said sharply. There was shock and chagrin and anger in his voice.

She stepped out into the room. "I'm going out," she said, "after I say what I have in my mind. I've been listening."

Colonel Ball showed his rage. "You've been eavesdropping?" he blurted.

"Spying, if you want to say it," she said. "And now I've heard enough and I'm leaving."

"Leaving?" The colonel stood staring down at her.

She brushed past him, walked quickly to Waldo Stone.

"I'm sick of all this rotten mess," she said defiantly. "I knew you were working with my father, but I didn't know you were a double-crossing informer for him. Now, I know where my father got his information about people who told their troubles to the newspaperman!"

WALDO STONE backed off. Silently he went out and closed the back door.

"You don't realize what you're saying, Maxine!" Colonel Ball said, trying to control his anger.

"I realize," she said. "Everything I should have done a long time ago. I heard you openly admit things you've done. Burning a livery stable as a warning. Burning those poor horses and now planning to kill Rod Gordon because he has the courage and legal knowledge to fight you."

"Maxine!" Colonel Ball shouted. "Think! We're all caught in this together."

"No, we're not."

"I wouldn't have done it if Rod Gordon hadn't crowded me."

"Yes, you would," she said. "You started by killing Blue Harmon. Nothing was crowding you then but your lust to grab everything in sight. Then you had Loony Tate killed. I know that now, after hearing your talk. He was a nice, kind little man who got in your way. He knew how you killed old Blue Harmon, so—"

Colonel Ball drew back to strike his daughter.

She confronted him with her eyes blazing.

"Hit me!" she taunted and braced herself. "Show your gunhands how you handle a woman."

The colonel dropped his arm. "I wasn't going to hit you," he said. He made an effort to keep his voice down. "I was only trying to quiet you. You're not yourself, Maxine."

"I was never more sane in my life," she said.

The colonel turned to Idaho and Kruse and Bowie. "I don't expect I'll need you the rest of the night. You can go to your rooms. We'll talk about this in the morning."

XVIII

KRUSE, Idaho and Bowie nodded and went outside. Their boots crunched the drive as they walked to their quarters over the barn. Colonel Ball turned back to his daughter.

"Now, then, Maxine," he said. He managed a smile. "I'm sorry you overheard me, but this is a man's world and this is the West and some things have to be handled in certain ways."

She looked past him, not answering.

"You'd better go to your room and get some rest. You're worn out. You spend too much time in your saddle, riding around, talking to the sort of people who have no place in our lives."

"No, Dad," she said. Her voice was calm and low. "I'm leaving you. I've had enough. I'm going into town—tonight."

"What under the sun will you do?"

"I'll find work. Maybe Mrs. Butler will let me help her trim hats at the Bon Ton. Anyway, I've got a little money Mother left me."

His face went suddenly dark again. "Your mother," he said. "You've grown more like her as you got older. With your high principles and small regard for money and position."

"I hope I'm like Mother," she said. "I've tried to respect you and be a good daughter to you. But I never got any more love from my father than my mother did from her husband. I was always just something to show off or help get influence for you."

She turned suddenly and ran up the stairs.

He followed her, talking.

In her room he was the kindly father with the gentle, disarming smile.

"Maxine," he said, "if you won't run away from me this time, I'll promise never to do an underhanded thing again. Just stand by me another week or so."

She shook her head.

"We'll be the first family in one of the finest cities in the West," he pleaded. "You'll be proud of me, Maxine. I've got a fine piece of land I'm going to donate for a park and another one for a big, modern school. They'll be erecting a monument to me in the park some day."

He tried to stand before her as she packed, so he could hold her attention.

"Don't you see? he begged. "Great things always have some troubles and dangers and sadness behind them. Everyone can't win. It's been like that through the ages. It will be until the end of—"

He stopped abruptly, realizing that his words were having no effect.

She finished her packing, picked up her valise and turned toward the door.

"You can have the rest of my things sent to the hotel, please. I'll be there until I get a job and a room at some boarding house."

"The hotel?" he said. "Gordon lives at the hotel. You're not thinking of going to him!"

"That," she said coldly, "doesn't deserve an answer."

"Think of all the talk!"

"There's so much talk now that a little more won't matter." She paused at the front door. "I'm sorry, Dad, it's got to be like this."

He put out his hands as if he would take her in his arms, but she went outside quickly and closed the door.

Deputy Downs stepped from beneath a cottonwood and held out his hand. "I'll carry your valise, Miss Maxine."

"It isn't heavy," she said. "Thanks just the same."

She walked rapidly away and didn't look back. . . .

ROD GORDON lay on the mattress he had put on the floor under the window and realized how tired he was. His head was aching, too, but the recent excitement must have blotted out the pain before.

He went over the plan of the bank holdup and his other plans. His head seemed to be a churn where conflicting thoughts were becoming more and more mixed.

He reached out his hand and touched the gun lying near as he heard low talk out in the hall past his door, then a key turned in a lock. He heard the quick clack of heels in the next room. Some woman had just gone in there. He heard Rans Speller's worn boots treading back to the stairs.

He lay down again and relaxed. Then he thought of the window above him, raised himself, lifted the shade and looked out. There was no sign of anyone on the roof. He settled back.

"Rod," he thought, "you're as jumpy as Waldo Stone was tonight."

He lay for a long time, breathing regularly to coax the sleep that would not come. Then suddenly he was sitting upright. There was a low tapping at his door and a woman's voice was whispering:

"Mr. Gordon! Let me in, please."

He threw a blanket about him, held a gun in one hand, opened the door with the other.

"Maxine!" he whispered.

She slipped in and closed the door. "I wouldn't have anyone find me in here for anything," she said in a low tone.

Rod Gordon locked the door and faced her. He wasn't at all sure of his position. This might be a trap devised by the colonel. He had tried to get him twice before. Now what had the colonel sent his daughter to do?

He stepped back a little from her as he lowered the gun. He glanced down in the darkness, trying to see if she carried any weapons. Pale light from the light in the hall, coming through the transom, showed her hands. They were empty.

She spoke quickly. "I don't know how to begin telling you what I came to say."

"Why not begin at the beginning?"

She shook her head. "No. I came to tell you certain things. In fact, I think I came to ask a special favor of you."

"What kind of a favor? Something I can do for your father, for instance?"

She seemed to sway slightly, then she grew rigid. "No, this isn't a favor to my father." She hesitated, apparently making up her mind to something, then she said, "I might as well tell you. Everyone will know it tomorrow. Rans Speller suspects it already."

"What?"

"I've left my father and his home. Don't ask me why. I've just left, and I'm on my own."

"What are you going to do?"

"Get a job. Perhaps the Bon Ton millinery can use me. I'm fairly good at trimming hats."

Rod stood his distance. "What's the favor?"

"Don't hold up the bank. Please!"

The shock her words gave him was small. He considered whether he should ask if Waldo had told. But of course he had.

"Don't ask me how I know," she hurried on, "but you were planning to hold it up soon and I wanted to ask you not to."

"Aside from the fact that your father might suffer a loss, why shouldn't we?"

"Can't you guess?" she said. "If I know you're going to hold up the bank, then—other people would know—and be ready. I don't want—all the killing!"

He studied her for a long time, then he said, "You know, you and your father are a clever pair."

He felt her eyes cold upon him. Her mouth was a straight, determined line. She turned and walked to the door.

"Will you let me out, please?"

"That's not all I have to say," Rod said. "Go tell your father I didn't think a man would stoop so low as to put his daughter in a situation like this to save himself some embarrassment. Go tell him he's even lower than I thought he was. As for you, Maxine, I'm disappointed. And you can go tell your stool pigeon friend, Waldo, that—"

Maxine broke in with a choking sound. "You fool!" she said. "You fool!"

He unlocked the door.

"Thanks for the warning," he said, "but it won't work."

She went out and he closed the door behind her. . . .

EARLY next morning, Colonel Ball routed out Sheriff Kruse and his deputies and Idaho and went over his own plans with them.

"We're going to be ready for this young polecat, Gordon, and his holdup," Colonel Ball said with satisfaction. He nodded to Deputy Downs. "Downs, you're to drill a hole in the ceiling of the bank just inside the front door. You'll be up there constantly with your six-guns ready for instant use."

Downs nodded.

"Bowie, you'll be inside the courthouse ready to shoot through the open door if trouble starts," the colonel went on. "Sheriff, you and Idaho will be watching from stores across the street from the bank. Jim Colton's drug store would make a good place for you, Idaho. You go tell them we're expecting a holdup but to keep it quiet. Arrange to sit upstairs in that front window of their living quarters so you can start shooting when it comes off."

"You mean I stay up there all the time?" Idaho demanded.

"I'll tell you about that," the colonel said. He turned to the sheriff. "Kruse, across from the bank corner in the other direction is Harvey Pratt's furniture store. You arrange with him to let you be on guard at that point. You'll all be at your positions a half-hour before the bank opens until a half-hour after it closes. Sheriff, you arrange with Homer Helm at the lunchroom to have sandwiches brought around for you men about noon and tell Homer to keep it quiet, too."

Idaho licked his lips. "You want us to plug Gordon the minute he gets in the bank?"

"Certainly not," Colonel Ball said. "This time we'll give no one a chance to hint about murder. Let Gordon and his gang start it. Then cut them down. And whatever you do, be sure you get Gordon!"

"That's going to be a heap of fun," Idaho enthused.

"Go and get yourselves established in your new positions before the bank opens this morning," Colonel Ball finished. "We don't know when they plan to strike. It may be this morning or tomorrow or the day after. But whenever it is, we'll be ready."

He didn't wait for his victoria to take him the short distance to the business section. He went out and walked rapidly down the road until he came to Judge Anders' green-and-white cottage half hidden in a grove of tall cottonwoods.

The judge looked at the colonel over his half-glass spectacles and saw the urgency in his face. He hurried him inside the house.

"I want you to do something about Maxine," Ball said.

"Maxine?" The judge looked down his long nose. "What's happened to Maxine?"

"She overheard some things last night and got her youthful indignation up. She's left me. Gone to the hotel, she said."

"That's too bad," the judge said. "I'll have a talk with her this morning and tell her how foolish she is."

"You will not," Ball said. "I'll bring her back, but on my terms. I want her crawling back to me. I want you to go tell Rans Speller to kick her out of his Donna Hotel. She said she was going to try to get a job at the Bon Ton doing millinery. Go tell that woman who runs the Bon Ton not to give her any work."

The colonel rose nervously. "Rans Speller will understand all right, and I think the woman at the Bon Ton will know what's good for her."

Judge Anders rose slowly. "Well, I don't know. I think I can handle Rans all right, but that Bon Ton woman is pretty independent. I think she's one of the few left hereabouts who isn't obligated to you in one way or another."

"Tell her, anyway," Ball said. "And if you find Maxine going anywhere else in town, to board or get a job, warn them also."

Judge Anders frowned. "Colonel Ball, I hope you won't mind my saying so, but you're letting your nerves get the best of you lately and it's telling on those who work for you."

Colonel Ball stopped pacing and glared at the judge, then he relaxed.

"I know," he said. "It's this crucial

time. When I get over this next few weeks I'll have things the way I want them."

"I just mentioned it," Judge Anders said. "I wouldn't trust any of your gunhands too far. I've heard they're getting pretty free with their talk." The judge stroked his long chin. "They might try to cut in on some of your profits, you know, feeling more certain of themselves."

Colonel Ball's teeth were clenched. He nodded. "I've sensed it. That's one reason I'm so anxious to get over the next few weeks, or even the next week or two."

"I'll do what I can about your daughter," the judge said.

XIX

JUDGE ANDERS saw his visitor to the door. Colonel Ball strode out and on down to the bank. He unlocked the front door of the bank and went in, locking it from inside again.

Some of the help was already there, getting ready for opening time.

Colonel Ball glanced up at the ceiling, saw the two-inch hole.

"You figure this is a big enough hole, Colonel?" he heard Downs' voice say.

"I think so," the colonel said.

He told the bank employees briefly of the plan and went into the courthouse through the connecting door. Bowie was sitting near the door.

"Bring on your Gordon gang," he said.

Daggert came out from behind a file desk, blinking through his thick glasses. "Go out the back way and get your shotgun," Colonel Ball instructed him. "You'll be armed in here every day to back up Bowie when the shooting starts."

"Yes, sir," Daggert said. He added in a whisper, "Are you planning to move the records from the vault, Colonel?"

"No, I don't think so."

"But if they did get hold of them?"

"They won't. I'm going to leave them in the vault and have the vault door open during the day so they can be seen. We're using those records for bait, Daggert. . . ."

At five minutes before ten, Rod Gordon stepped out of the lunchroom, hitched his loaded twin guns and strolled up the street toward the drug store. Last night had been cool, with the coming of fall, but the sun was now beating down so that he tipped his hat forward slightly to shade his eyes.

He had almost reached the drug store when he glanced casually at the bank. There were some rigs tied at the racks along the street, and two saddle horses were at the rack before the bank. They could have been ridden by the Lathrop brothers.

Rod turned in at the drug store. He went in and closed the door. Jim Colton peeked out at him through the prescription department.

"Nice morning, Jim," Rod said. "What do you know this morning?"

"Not a thing," Jim said.

He kept fiddling with his chin like a man with a bad case of nerves. Rod lifted his eyes toward the ceiling.

"Nothing new, eh?"

Jim coughed as if he might choke, then he said, "No. Not a thing."

Rod lowered his voice. "I didn't expect anything just yet. It may take a day or so to get some action on that matter."

"That all you want?" Jim asked. It sounded like an invitation to Rod to leave.

"Why?" Rod sauntered farther back in the store, and saw beads of sweat ooze out on the druggist's forehead.

"What's the matter with you this morning, Jim?" he asked softly.

"Not a thing," Jim said almost in a whisper. "I'm kind of busy, putting up medicine."

Then Rod caught the slightest flick of Jim Colton's eyes raised ceilingward and suddenly he knew what was troubling Jim.

"In that case," he said, "I won't bother you. As a matter of fact, I've got to be at the bank by ten. What time is it now?"

Jim opened his mouth to tell the time and stood there like that.

"Must be about ten right about now," Rod said, went out and crossed the street.

There were plenty of people about. He saw several in the bank, one of the Lathrop brothers among them.

Lute Wormer was coming up the street with his double-barreled shotgun in the crook of his arm. Bump Yost was with him, carrying his shotgun over his shoulder.

They seemed to be holding a friendly conversation as they walked toward the bank corner. Lute glanced at Rod, then at Bump, and Bump kept looking straight ahead.

ROD could almost feel the guns on him from buildings across the street from the bank. He was thinking of what Jim Colton's actions meant. One of Colonel Ball's men was upstairs in Jim's front window where Mrs. Colton sat nights watching for some movement of the records from the bank vault. Rod turned his head to look into the furniture store across from the bank. He saw a quick movement in the window. Someone had ducked down out of sight among the furniture on display. But the movement was not quick enough to hide the flash of light on the blued-steel barrel of a rifle.

So Colonel Ball had a guard hidden in the furniture store. That made two that Rod knew about. He wondered how many more were scattered around. Lute and Bump were pausing at the bank entrance, and Bump was striking a light so Lute could ignite his pipe. They fussed around as Rod passed them and entered the bank.

Ahead of him were two men and a woman he didn't know at the teller's window. Ed Lathrop was at the wall desk, leaning heavily, writing out a slip. Tom Lathrop, his brother, was standing at the end of the desk building a cigarette.

Rod saw their guns shine. The boys had evidently been working on their guns during the night.

Suddenly, Rod felt like the singer on a stage with light and eyes upon him from every direction. Ed Lathrop had paused in his writing and turned. The teller behind his window seemed to be crouched for trouble.

Colonel Ball leaned forward in his desk chair, his eyes fastened on Rod, as if he might duck under the desk for cover at the slightest warning. Rod made a particular effort to smile at the colonel and he was suddenly surprised at how easily the smile came.

"Good morning, Colonel," he said. He went on to the paying teller's cage and stood behind a railroad workman.

He got a glimpse into the vault. The door was open wide and he could see the stack of records. He looked away, saw the sweat pouring down the white face of the paying teller.

The railroad workman cashed his check and went out, and Rod stepped up. He presented a check to be cashed, already made out. The teller's hands trembled as he counted the money and passed it out to him.

"Thank you," Rod said. He turned and walked slowly out of the bank, apparently preoccupied with counting his money.

Outside, he spoke to Lute Wormer standing with his shotgun at the south side of the bank entrance.

"Going hunting, Lute?" he asked.

"Bump and I was figuring to," Lute said.

Rod looked up at the sky. "It's going to be too hot to hunt today, Lute, and I need a haircut."

"Well," Lute said, "I suppose we could put off the hunting. Couldn't we, Bump?"

"Reckon so," said Bump.

The three walked down the street together. They stopped at the barber shop and Lute unlocked the door.

"Looks like a cinch, taking that stuff out the bank," Lute said when they were inside.

"They ain't even got Idaho around dressed up in his monkey suit," Bump Yost said.

Rod took off his hat and got in Lute's

barber chair. "Just take your time trimming me," he said. "The Lathrop boys should be along soon. We'll see what they found out."

Lute put the apron over him and began running a comb through his hair. Now Rod realized how jumpy the barber was. The comb was shaking as he ran it through Rod's thick brown hair. The barber began snipping at the hair ends, and the scissors sometimes chattered against the back of the comb.

"One thing we've got to be careful of," Rod said. "We don't want to get nervous and shoot anybody."

"If things is like they was this morning," Lute said, "it won't be hard, with nobody around guarding the place."

Two horses were reined in to the rack out front and the Lathrop boys dismounted.

They came in and sat down on the bench along the wall.

"How did it go with you?" Rod said, watching the boys in the mirror.

Tom coughed. "Ought to be easy, if things works out like this morning."

"Too easy," Ed said. "When I went to put in my two dollars to my account I seen the teller has got a loaded six-gun right there beside him."

FOR a moment Rod considered telling them about the two guards in the buildings across from the bank. Then he saw Tom Lathrop smoking his cigarette, and the hand that held the twister was shaky.

When Lute was through cutting Rod's hair the barber asked:

"You figure we'll practice again tomorrow morning?"

"We'll wait a day or so and see how things develop," Rod said. "I've got some scouting around to do." He got up out of the chair and said, "It might be a good idea if one or two of us hung around the bank now and then just to get people used to seeing us there."

"You don't reckon they'll have a right to shoot us for just hanging around?" Ed Lathrop asked.

"Not if we don't start anything," Rod said. "We'll meet at Sam Redman's blacksmith shop at seven o'clock day after tomorrow morning and decide when to make the move."

"We got to wait that long?" Tom Lathrop looked a little sick.

Lute Wormer cleared his throat nervously.

"If we got to do this, why don't we do it and get it over with?"

Rod Gordon wondered if he should tell them everything that was in his mind.

He decided against it. News leaked out, sometimes, even when told to trusted men in confidence.

"We just want to be sure," he said. "There's no need of taking any more chances than necessary."

He moved toward the door. Doc Dixon's rig stopped out in front and he wound the reins around the whip stock and got out.

Rod met him on the board walk. There were people going by.

"Rod," Doc said loud enough for all to hear, "you better come up after a while and let me look at your head. Want to be sure it's healing all right."

"Any time you say, Doc," Rod said.

"About one o'clock," Doc said.

"I'll be there," Rod said. He went up to his office and unlocked the door. A little while afterward a big man in Eastern clothes and with clipped speech came in to have Rod check over a construction contract for him.

It was drawn by Colonel Ball and signed by him.

The Easterner wasn't accepting it until a lawyer looked it over.

"There are some clauses that should be changed here," Rod said. "I'll see the colonel this afternoon. The payment date should be more definite. The way this is, Colonel Ball could make you wait for your money several months if he wanted to."

The man nodded, rose. "You get it fixed up." He left.

It was a good break. Rod could go up and hang around the bank a little while before it closed. That would give him a good chance to look the place over more thoroughly.

XX

PROMPTLY at one o'clock Rod was in Doc Dixon's office and Doc was examining his head.

"It's healing fine," Doc said. "Just try not to get hit in the head again soon." He looked at Rod strangely. "You'll have to be extra careful with that job I hear you're planning."

"Who told you—Jim Colton?"

Doc nodded. "He came up about ten this morning with some drugs I'd ordered and told me his troubles."

"I hope this hasn't made his wife worse."

"That's one funny thing," Doc said. "Jim says she's a lot better, now she's got something to think about to take her mind off herself. But Jim's got a bad case of nerves."

"You mean with a gunman in their front window all day?"

Doc frowned. "How did you know?"

"I guessed. And there's another one over in the furniture store, with a rifle."

"Jim stays down in the store and worries himself sick about that little fishy-eyed Idaho being upstairs, with his wife up there."

"Thanks for telling me it's Idaho," Rod said. "I suppose it's the sheriff or one of his deputies in the furniture store."

"This is the first I knew for sure anybody was there." Doc scrutinized him. "I wish I was younger, Rod. I'd be inclined to help you hold up that bank and get those records out in the open."

Rod eyed him sharply. "Did they tell Jim Colton about the records when they sent Idaho up to his second floor?"

"No. They just told him they were expecting trouble. But he overheard the sheriff and Idaho talking about it. They didn't figure Jim could hear."

"Has Jim told anybody else?" Rod asked in some alarm. "I don't want any crowd around when this comes off. We don't want to hurt anyone."

"You're going through with it, are you?"

Rod took a deep breath. "You're the only one I've admitted this to, Doc. I'll expect you to keep it secret. You see, if it gets out, Colonel Ball won't do what I want him to."

"Colonel!" Doc said. "That's one thing makes me mad every time I hear it. I'll bet an amputated little finger that slick crook is no more an Army colonel than I am President of these United States." He shook his head. "Go on, Rod. And don't worry about me letting anything out you want kept secret."

"Well," Rod said, "I didn't plan on holding up the bank outright. I asked Waldo Stone to our meeting because you seemed to think he was sort of a stool pigeon for Ball. So I roped him into the deal and then let him back out, and from all appearances he went straight to Ball with the whole story. I know Ball knows about it because last night Maxine Ball came into my room with a story that to save lives I'd better give up the holdup idea. She said her father had learned about it and there would be plenty of killing if we tried to pull it off."

Doc leaned forward. "Maxine came to your room—in the hotel?"

Rod nodded. "She tried to feed me some story about leaving her father for good or something and—"

"That was the truth," Doc said. "She told the same thing to Mrs. Butler at the Bon Ton Millinery this morning. She said she had broken with her father, and Mrs. Butler's thinking about letting her work for her."

"Why, I figured she and her father had teamed up in some trick to get me to call off the—"

"Maxine's not that kind," Doc said. "You've only been in town a few days and you don't know her yet. But for my money, son, Maxine is the finest girl that ever walked in this town."

ROD took a deep breath.

"What a skunk I turned out to be!" he muttered. "I certainly treated her rough if she was honest about coming to see me."

"You can patch that up, maybe," Doc said.

"No," Rod said gravely, "I don't think I ever could. Not with what I'm planning to do now."

"The holdup?"

"That's right. We're going to have to go through with the straight daylight holdup of the bank. I don't think Colonel Ball is going to fall for the trap I set for him. I was hoping if I let it be known that a holdup was being planned he'd move the records we're after out of the vault and put them in the basement of the courthouse."

"Why there?"

"Maybe you heard about the fuss I made at the courthouse. Colonel Ball knows that I was searching for those records and didn't find them anywhere in the courthouse. So if you were going to move something to hide it from a searching party and you could move it at night, you'd hide it where the searching party had already looked, wouldn't you?"

Doc Dixon beamed. "By George, you're right, Rod!"

"Except that I don't think it's going to work. Mrs. Colton talked me into having her sit up nights and watch the bank and see if there was any activity there. I was hoping it would come by now, but it hasn't."

"If they did move the records to the basement, what did you figure to do then?"

"Breaking in a cellar window there would be easy," Rod said. "Hack Midland and I could do the job some night and we wouldn't be taking the chance of endangering lives."

"It might work yet," Doc said.

"The holdup won't wait," Rod said. "The boys are as spooky as range cattle on a drive. They'll be half loco in another few days." He rose to leave.

"All I can say, is good luck," Doc said. "If I can do anything, let me know. . . ."

Rod Gordon tried to see Maxine Ball that evening and apologize, but she wasn't in her room at the hotel. He listened as long as he was awake, but heard no sound there.

He got up early and shaved and washed, wondering if this would be the last time he would perform that morning rite.

"I wouldn't be concerned so much if I knew where the two deputies might be stationed," he thought.

He went out and walked south on Main Street, turned down to the back street and entered the blacksmith shop. They were there already—Lute Wormer and Hack Midland, Bump Yost, Sam Redman and the two Lathrops. Rod Gordon promptly came to the point.

"The time's today, one o'clock this afternoon. Most of the folks are eating or staying out of the heat at that time. There won't be many in the bank. Colonel Ball generally is home at that time."

"I was hoping he'd be there for my special benefit," Hack said.

"There'll be no shooting," Rod said. "Not unless you have to. Then don't shoot to kill, if you can help it."

"You want them horses we mentioned?" Tom Lathrop asked.

"Yes," Rod said. "But I've changed my mind about a wagon. I happened to remember, Sam. This was the pony express stop before the stage began coming through, wasn't it? You get those canvas saddle-bags you used to have?"

Sam walked to the back of the blacksmith shop and pulled a pile of big saddle-bags off the shelf. He beat the dust out of them.

"Two saddle-bags to a horse and a horse for each man. You two Lathrops ride and lead the horses up past the newspaper office and tie them there just before you get to the corner. We'll follow the same order we followed before except we might use all but Lute to carry out the records. Lute, you stay outside on watch."

Rod ran over the setup again so they would remember.

"I've got some legal business to talk over with Colonel Ball," he added. "A client. I'll go in and sit down by his desk and be waiting for him to come back from dinner. About five minutes after that, you Lathrop boys come in. Then Hack and Bump."

"What am I going to be doing all

this time?" Sam Redman asked.

"I've changed my mind about you, Sam," Rod said. "You've got a wife and a good blacksmithing business here and you've got too much to lose."

SAM grumbled and put up arguments.

"There isn't time to talk about it," Rod said. "You can help the boys saddle up their horses and loan us the saddle-bags. If we ever get this thing squared away legally, we'll return the bags."

"You're sure going through with it this time?" asked Ed Lathrop.

"This is the time," Rod said, "unless I give you the signal that it's off."

"What signal?" Hack Midland asked.

"If I reach up and take hold of my nose, that means no holdup."

Tom Lathrop threw his butt on the floor and ground it under his heel. He said, "I don't reckon I can stand losing sleep much longer."

Bump Yost laughed tonelessly. "You ain't the only one. But I'm going through to get even for the shootin' of my friend, Loony."

"After we get the saddle-bags loaded with the records, we make a break," said Rod. "We ride off in three directions. You can break whichever way is easiest for you. We'll meet at Loony's cabin on the mesa."

"That'll be a good thing," Bump said. "His mice'll be missing him pretty bad by now. I was figuring to get up with some stuff and feed 'em."

"Rod," Sam said, "my old woman's going to raise ructions if—"

"Sorry," Rod said. " I wouldn't feel right about it." He turned toward the door. "I'll see you all at the bank at one o'clock. All but you, Sam. You'll thank us afterward."

He went out, walked to his law office and tried to get his mind on the rewriting of the contract. But nothing except that holdup seemed to stay in his thoughts.

At a little after twelve, noon, he walked into Owen Bryce's hardware store and laid a two-bit piece on the counter.

"I'd like a few lengths of rawhide, Owen," he said.

Bryce took a hank of half-inch rawhide strips from a drawer and laid it on the counter. He put five cents change on the counter and went on setting a new shipment of pickle crocks along a high shelf.

Rod went out and crossed the street. He walked down the street, cut back to the rear alley through a new one-story building where carpenters were pounding. Up the alley he walked quietly, smelling the odors of cooking—corned beef being cooked with cabbage, beefsteak and pork chops frying.

He wondered if there would be any future for him, when he would eat again. If he was going to be shot, it would be best not to eat just before that. It made complications for the doctor if a man had to be sewed up over a full stomach.

"Sewed up!" he muttered. "What makes you think, Gordon, that they'd let you live long enough to get sewed up?"

His legs went a little rubbery and he stiffened them by sheer will power. He was suddenly glad he had no wife and no family, and he was glad, too, that he had told Sam Redman to stay out of it, with a wife and a good blacksmithing business.

He turned in at the back of the drug store building, stopped and stood there, waiting. Mary Something, who worked as counter girl in Helm's lunchroom, had just come to the rear of the drug store with a bag of what must be sandwiches. Someone took them and Mary went back to Main Street.

He opened the door quietly. Jim Colton was going up the back stairs. Rod followed him up on his tiptoes. A board squeaked under him, but Jim didn't seem to notice.

Above, Jim said, low, "Here's the sandwiches for Idaho."

His wife said, "Take them to him yourself. I'll have nothing to do with him."

Rod made three quick jumps up the stairs and caught Jim's arm.

"Don't make a sound, Jim," he whispered. "I'll take them to him."

Jim caught his breath. But he made no outcry.

Rod took the sandwiches in his left hand and drew his right-hand gun. He pushed open the door to the sitting room and stepped in.

IDAHO'S head showed at the top of the rocker by the window. His rifle lay across the arms of the chair. He turned as he heard Rod come in, and growled:

"You got that grub?"

"Uh-huh," Rod said and walked into the room.

Idaho peered around the chair back, then jerked back with the shock of what he saw.

"Hold 'em high and don't make a sound, or you're a dead gunhand," Rod said.

For an instant Idaho stalled.

"Quick!" Rod said and tightened his finger on his trigger.

One hand came up above the back of the rocker, then the other.

"Don't stand up till I get there," Rod said. "No need of making the noise of a gun falling to the floor." He came up beside Idaho and lifted the rifle off his lap and nodded. "Now get up."

Idaho rose slowly.

"Flat on your face on the floor," Rod said.

"Don't a man get to eat his grub first?"

"I haven't eaten, either. Down on your face!"

Rod prodded him with the gun and he went down. Rod laid down the sandwiches and lifted the guns from Idaho's holsters. He caught Idaho's hands behind his back and threw a length of rawhide around them. He tied the wrists fast, then the ankles, tied them so they came close together. He caught up Idaho's neckerchief and bound it around his mouth so he couldn't cry out.

"You ought to keep until you can't do me much harm." He left the man on the floor and took the guns with him, locked the door and pocketed the key.

Mrs. Colton was flushed and excited when she saw him.

"Good for you, Rod!" she said. "That's what I was trying to get my husband to do."

"You've been on watch at night?" Rod asked softly.

"Yes, but we haven't seen anything going on at the bank."

He left the rifle and Idaho's guns in Mrs. Colton's care and went out. He had a defeated, desperate feeling. Things hadn't worked out at all as he had planned them. Yet he was lucky to have found out about at least two of the guards.

He made a wide circle and entered the living quarters of the Pratt family behind their furniture store. Harvey and his chubby wife were having their noonday meal. Mrs. Pratt was startled when Rod came walking in, and she let out a low cry.

Rod brought a finger to his lips. He saw the white face of the little woman and tried to smile to reassure her.

"I'm sorry to have to break in like this," he whispered.

"What's going on back there?" a voice from the furniture store called.

"That's Kruse," Harvey said.

He jerked his head toward a curtain closing off a doorway to the right and Rod slipped behind it. He could hear heavy steps coming back from the furniture store.

XXI

SHERIFF KRUSE opened the door into the Pratt living quarters.

"What was the screaming about?" he demanded. He had a Winchester carbine pointed ahead of him. The hammer was back.

"I must have got a bone in my throat," Mrs. Pratt said. "It choked me."

Sheriff Kruse turned to go back.

Rod waited for the sheriff to get back into the store. Then he stepped out with drawn guns.

"Better get out of range," he whispered to the Pratts.

The door into the furniture store

opened then and Kruse charged back in with his rifle ready. Rod Gordon had him in his guns from the side.

"Drop it, quick, Kruse!" he ordered.

Kruse flashed his eyes to him, hesitated for an instant.

Rod moved his fingers on the triggers. "Drop the gun!"

Kruse lowered the rifle. "You backshooting snake!"

"Who are you to talk? Put the gun down and raise them high."

"How'd you know I was here?" Kruse glared at Harvey Pratt and his wife. "Did they tell?"

"No, you just got clumsy. The first day we practiced for the holdup, I saw you duck behind furniture and saw the blue glint of your rifle." He jerked his head to a side door. "Get over to the undertaking parlor where Blue Harmon wound up."

"You got no right shootin' an unarmed man!" Kruse said.

"Get in there!"

Kruse moved ahead of him, pushing open the door with his foot.

"Up on the table," Rod said. "It won't smell so well, perhaps, but let's say you helped make it that way."

Sheriff Kruse walked to the edge of the undertaker's work bench and froze there. Rod prodded him with a six-gun, and suddenly Sheriff Kruse turned on him and lashed out.

He caught Rod with a right and followed up with his left. He sent the young attorney reeling back, trying to get his balance.

Rod let go his guns and landed on his back, and the sheriff leaped at him with boot heels striking.

Rod tried to roll and caught one of the heels in his middle. It doubled him, almost made him cry out with pain. He caught the swinging foot of the sheriff, turned it and Kruse groaned and fell back.

Up on his feet again, Rod went for him with nothing but his fists, and the sheriff tore at him, growling:

"We're even now. You got no surprise punch on me. I—"

Rod's left flipped up Kruse's head and sent him hurtling back against the table. And Rod followed it with everything he had. He battered the sheriff until Kruse was ready to slide off into unconsciousness. Then Rod heaved him on the table, turned him on his face and threw a half hitch of rawhide around his wrists.

The young attorney was catching his breath when he saw Harvey Pratt watching from the door.

"What time is it, Harvey?" Rod asked.

"Ten minutes to one," Harvey said. "Phew, that was a close one."

Sheriff Kruse was beginning to move again. Rod tied his ankles and wrapped a towel around his mouth, tying it hard in the back.

"Got to hurry," he said. "Got a date at the bank."

He locked the two doors that led into the embalming room and put the keys in his pocket. He paused in the Pratts' kitchen to straighten his tie and clothes, then went outside and walked to the bank.

He walked at his usual gait entering the bank. He carried the Easterner's contract in his hand but his coat was drawn back on either side so he could get at his guns.

A woman in blue gingham was at the paying teller's window. One of the men Colonel Ball had brought with him was behind the cage—a studious, middle-aged man with glasses. He didn't seem to notice Rod.

Rod looked behind the cages at the heavy vault door. His pulse almost stopped for an instant. The door, from where he stood, looked to be closed. He moved toward the balustrade around the colonel's desk and there he could get a better angle on the vault door. It was open but not more than a few inches.

HIS heart settled down again. The woman left the teller's window and the teller turned to Rod. A startled look crossed his face, then he forced a smile.

"Yes?" he said.

"I have a contract to go over with the colonel when he comes," Rod said. "I'll just sit by his desk and wait." He didn't give the teller any time to answer, or object.

Beside the colonel's desk Rod took a straight-backed chair without any arms. He felt the eyes of the teller upon him.

Rod turned his attention to scrutinizing the bank. From where he sat he couldn't see inside the vault. There was a lamp burning inside it. He could see light in the crack, but that was all.

The teller came over to the enclosed portion and said:

"Colonel Ball won't be back for some time. Perhaps you'd rather come back later."

"I might as well wait and be first to see him when he does return," Rod said.

The door from the bank wing to the courthouse was open. Somehow, he had a feeling there might be someone in there who shouldn't hear his voice, so he spoke softly.

The teller returned to his work behind the cage. Rod looked for any hiding place for guards about the bank. The back wall, all the way to the vault, was lined with files and rows of books on finance. Above those, there was no sign of any opening through which a guard might shoot.

He turned his eyes up to the ceiling. It was a high ceiling, fourteen or fifteen feet above the floor level. There was a chandelier of kerosene lamps hanging from the center of it.

Suddenly, Rod came up short in his seat. His roving eye had caught a hole in the ceiling over near the door. Then a slight sound came to him. Crisp paper rustled softly and for an instant the whole bank seemed to hold the sound, then it was gone.

He couldn't be sure just where the sound had come from but he thought it came from the direction of the hole in the ceiling. He sat motionless and his nostrils sniffed the air. The odor that he had suspected reached him. The faint scent of bread and butter and meat. The smell of sandwiches.

Moving his chair slightly, he sat looking over at the ceiling hole, inspecting it more carefully. It was a good two inches across, but instead of being a jagged break in the plaster, as if it had cracked out by itself, it was round and fairly even, as if it had been cut into the plaster.

Rod Gordon knew then that a guard was up there above the ceiling, waiting to shoot his gang as they went out of the bank door.

He turned at another sound of paper rustling. That, he was sure, came from just beyond the door into the courthouse. Another guard must be sitting back of that partition, eating his lunch.

Rod glanced at the clock on the wall. It was exactly one o'clock. He heard a muffled *clop* of hoofs outside in the street beside the bank. That would be the Lathrop brothers with the horses.

Hack Midland, carrying his shotgun and Bump Yost with his single six-gun, suddenly appeared in the doorway of the bank. Rod saw Lute Wormer pass the front window with his shotgun, hammers cocked.

The two Lathrop brothers came behind Hack and Bump. The faces of all the men were grim. They were looking at Rod for any signal he might give.

Rod flashed a glance at the ceiling hole again. He leaped out of the chair.

"Look out! Get out from—"

His eyes had caught the glint of a six-shooter muzzle poked through the hole, but the blast cut off his words.

Fire sprayed down from the ceiling and Bump Yost crumpled against the side of the bank entrance.

Hack Midland let out a savage curse and turned his double-barreled shotgun up toward the ceiling. He let go both barrels at once and the building shook from the explosion.

Remembering the rattle of paper in the courthouse, Rod sensed action from that quarter and fell behind the colonel's desk as a gun roared.

He felt the blast of lead tearing past his neck, drew and fired as he turned.

BOWIE was in the act of ducking back of the partition when Rod's lead caught him. Bowie's big bearded face took on a stupid look for an instant.

He fought to raise his right-hand gun to fire again but one of the Lathrops dropped him cold across the threshold.

Rod whirled on the bank teller. The man had a six-shooter in his hand but the hand was raised in surrender. The teller dropped the gun.

"How's Bump Yost?" Rod asked.

"He's done for," Hack Midland said. "but I got the dirty son upstairs that got him."

"Start moving the records," Rod said. "I'll see if there's anybody else in the courthouse."

He reached the doorway into the courthouse, turned Bowie over and saw the bullet-hole near his heart.

"That doesn't pay for Blue Harmon's death," he muttered, "but it helps."

He barked an order to the bank teller. "Get down on your face on the floor." The teller obeyed.

Hack Midland and the Lathrops were moving to the back of the bank behind the partition. Rod turned his eyes on the vault where they were heading.

He was far enough now so that he could look into the crack of the vault door and see what was at the back of the big safe. The pile of records and papers that he had seen there before were not there!

Hack Midland reached the safe and growled, "Hey, Rod. There's no records here in this vault."

Outside, Lute Wormer was saying, "Everybody keep back and you won't get hurt. Get out of my sight before I count three or I'll pull these triggers." Standing crouched in the doorway of the courthouse, Rod was trying to think. Mrs. Colton had not seen them moving the records from the bank, so they must have done it in the daytime when she was not watching.

A sick feeling caught him. A feeling that all this had been for nothing. Of course there was the basement of the courthouse where the records might have been stored, and they could have been moved from the vault to the courthouse without having been seen at all. That had been Rod's first idea. But somehow now, it seemed to him, that he and his boys were running into such hard luck that it couldn't have happened.

He might as well have a look, though. He took a quick step into the courthouse from the bank doorway and plunged across the floor. The shotgun he had seen aimed over a record desk roared in the courthouse and echoed through the two places.

Rod rolled twice on the floor, slammed himself against the desk over which the gun had exploded. He heard the pounding feet of someone running back into the courthouse rear, got up and started after him.

"There's a crowd collecting outside across the street!" Tom Lathrop was yelling behind him. "Lute wants to know shall he shoot."

"No!" Rod shouted back. Tell them it's for—"

There was no time to finish. Daggert, the clerk, had turned at the top of the stairs. His face was white and set. He brought the shotgun around to fire, gave it up and plunged down the stairs.

Rod tore after him, started down the stairs, remembering how he had cornered Idaho there.

He drew back, closed the door and turned to go out the back way. A running figure charged into the newspaper office behind the bank and he recognized the flowing black hair and the long spindle legs of Judge Anders.

"Hack Midland," Rod called, "come here! Bring Tom Lathrop with you. Ed, you go out and help Lute talk off the crowd. Tell them about the shooting of Loony Tate being a put-up job. Tell them we suspect Hack Midland's livery stable burning was—"

"Sure," Ed said, and ran out front with Lute.

"We'll have trouble with Waldo Stone and the judge," Rod said. "The judge just ran into Waldo's place."

"That'll be my job," Hack said. "I got a hunch it was Waldo seen me at Doc's talking to you and got my place set on fire."

He started out the rear door of the courthouse.

"Tom," Rod said softly, "you go outside and smash a couple of cellar windows. Daggert, the clerk, is down cellar and I'm going to get him when you distract his attention."

Tom hurried outside with his guns drawn.

Rod started creeping down the open stairway into the dark cellar. He heard the crash of window glass and charged down yelling.

DAGGERT was cowering in one of the storage rooms, half hidden by a low pile of records. He leveled the shotgun but Rod beat him to the fire. Daggert reared up, grabbed his shoulder and staggered against the wall.

Rod threw the shotgun across the cellar, loaded one arm with records and started up the stairs.

There was a series of gunshots back of the courthouse, the bellowing roar of shotguns and the bark of forty-fives. Then Hack Midland was cursing.

"Try to take advantage of peaceful folks, will you?" he shouted. "Playing up to a varmint like that colonel in your paper and you, Judge, doing his dirty legal work."

Rod was running up the stairs with his load. He met Tom Lathrop charging in.

"It's all over for the minute, Tom," Rod panted. "The records are in the cellar. We load up and get out. Bring up all you can carry and load them into the saddle-bags. I'll take Bump's horse, loaded, with me."

Hack Midland met them outside. "Here, let me help carry them things," he said.

"There's plenty more in the basement," Rod said. "Tom'll show you where."

The loading of the records didn't take long. About two trips to each of the three men, and the records were in the saddle-bags.

Rod Gordon mounted with the others. He yelled to Lute Wormer and Ed Lathrop, still speaking to the growing crowd. They mounted with the others. All jumped their horses and rode off.

XXII

NATURALLY Colonel Ball heard the shooting, and he came running down the road from his house as the riders were galloping away. He saw two horsemen riding hard down Main Street, heading south, with saddlebags full and flapping as the horses jumped. He made out two riders following a leader heading west out of town.

Colonel Ball drew his gun from the shoulder holster and fired, but the range was too far for effective shooting.

"Get after those crooks, man!" he yelled. "I'll pay a thousand dollars for each man brought back, dead or alive!"

The crowd of men and women seemed not to have heard him. The colonel came running on, turning at the furniture store, stared in the window as he ran past, stopped for another look.

The crowd had moved over to the bank. Doc Dixon came running down from his house.

"Anybody hurt?" he asked, and sighted Bump Yost just inside the bank door.

The teller was up off the floor, telling what he knew.

Colonel Ball slammed into the furniture store.

"Kruse!" he shouted. "Sheriff Kruse! Where in—"

"Back here," Kruse said in a muffled voice. "I'm locked in this undertaking—room."

Colonel Ball broke in to him, slashed the rawhide that bound him and glared at him.

"You're a fine sheriff! What happened to you?" Kruse told him while they ran for the drug store.

They broke into the front room of the Coltons' living quarters and found Idaho trying to get free. He stood up after they had cut him loose, panting for his breath.

"Mighty near suffocated with that gag in my mouth."

"A lot more than suffocation is likely to happen to you," Colonel Ball said, "if you let that man, Gordon, trick you again."

"What you hinting about?" Idaho demanded.

"Never mind that now," Colonel Ball said. "Let's get over to the bank and see if we can find out where they went."

They passed through the growing crowd. The street was half full of men and women milling about the bank entrance. Doc Dixon met them at the door to the bank.

"Your county clerk has got a badly torn shoulder," he said. "Bump Yost is about gone. Bowie is dead."

"There's more back at the newspaper office," the teller said. "There was shooting back there and I heard the livery stable man say he'd got the judge and Waldo Stone." The teller glanced up. "I think you'll find Deputy Downs dead up over the ceiling, too."

Colonel Ball groaned and grew sick. He turned on Bump Yost, lying on his back on the floor. He drew back as if to kick the dying little stableman in the head. Then he got hold of himself, and suddenly he bent down.

Bump Yost was mumbling. His chest heaved and he made strange noises. Colonel Ball shook him by the bloody shoulder.

"Where did they go? Where were you going to meet?"

He shook Bump, hard.

"Stop shaking that dying man!" Doc Dixon barked. "Can't you let a human being die in peace?"

Ball turned on the doctor. "I'll handle this my own way. You'll be lucky if you're not charged with aiding the holdup."

The colonel shook Bump again. "Where did they go?"

Bump was writhing again, still mumbling. "Got to—Loony. Feed his—mice. Got to—Loony's cabin. Got to get—" His last word trailed off, then Bump Yost went limp.

Colonel Ball got up. He turned to the sheriff and Idaho.

"So they've gone to Loony Tate's cabin. Get some horses." He stepped outside. "Fellow citizens," he said, "you've witnessed the bold holdup of the bank. I'm asking your help. I'll give a hundred dollars to every man who will follow us. I'll give a thousand dollars for the capture of Rod Gordon, dead or alive."

Sheriff Kruse and Idaho commandeered three saddled horses and brought them up. The colonel chose one and mounted. He waved his gun.

"We're going after them at Loony Tate's cabin on the mesa. Follow us!"

Not a man on the street moved. The dust rose behind the horses as the three riders put them into a run. . . .

ROD GORDON and the Lathrops finished their climb up the mesa trail as the sun began settling over the western plain. They rode on to the half-hidden shack where Loony Tate had lived.

There was a little corral at the rear and they unsaddled and put their horses in there.

They brought in the saddle-bags with the records and Rod began to go over them. He ran through book after book of old records, found here and there a page torn out. He was beginning to lose hope when he came upon one item and read:

Webster Fremont. Lazy F ranch. Taxes paid.

He looked at the year of the record book. "That was one of the years Web said his place had been reported delinquent for taxes," he said. "Now let's see some of these other books."

He ran through other books, and found similar discrepancies.

Tom Lathrop came in from watching beyond the rimrock of the mesa.

"There's a tail of dust growing this way," he reported.

Rod looked up frowning. "How many riders?"

"One. I think it's a girl. She's riding like the devil."

Rod closed the books. He walked outside and over to the edge of the rim. He could see the rider clearly.

He could see her so well now that he recognized her.

"It's Maxine Ball!" he said.

"What you reckon she wants?" Ed Lathrop asked.

Rod Gordon didn't answer him. He

was thinking of what the doctor had said about Maxine. He was thinking of what he would have said to her, in apology, if he had found her at the hotel after he left the doctor's office.

He watched her push her horse, waited while she wound up the trail, disappearing sometimes from his view.

She topped the rim, reined in her frothing horse and he gave her a hand down. She caught her breath and burst out:

"I know you will think I'm insane for coming here to you, after the things you said to me the other night."

"I'm sorry for what I said. I had the wrong slant."

She heaved a great sigh. "I came here," she said, "to tell you something in an effort to square matters on account of my father. I think I owe it to the people of the county. I want to see things made right, as much as can be."

"What did you want to tell me?"

"That you're in danger, and so are the records you took. My father has found out that you were all going to meet here."

"How did he find out?"

"Bump Yost mentioned it in his delirium—before he died."

"They're on their way here now?"

"They should be. I grabbed the first horse in sight and started while my father was making his speech, asking for help. He's offering a reward for you, dead or alive."

He read the anxiety in her face and the fear in her eyes.

"Thanks for coming, Maxine," he said sincerely. "You've proved true what the doctor told me about you."

"I don't understand."

"I'll tell you when there's more time." He looked off the way she had come. "I don't see any sign of your father and his posse."

"I don't expect they'll come up the way I did. They know they'd be seen. They'd take a little longer and come up through the timber so they'd be hidden."

"I thought they might come in force as fast as they could get here," he said, and handed her the reins of her horse. "You'd better get back to town, hadn't you, before they find you here?"

"I have nothing to go back to," she said.

"But you can't stay here."

"I can help you hide the records to be sure they're kept for the people who have a right to them. I can at least do that."

He nodded. "If that's the way you want it. You can help the Lathrops hide the records in the brush."

They went back and began work. And when they had the records nearly all hidden in brush back of the cabin, Rod gave Tom and Ed Lathrop the last order.

"You look after the records and Miss Ball. I'm taking a little walk over in the timber."

He strode off. . . .

COLONEL BALL and the sheriff and Idaho broke their running horses to single-footing as they came to the long strip of timber that rose up the back slope of the mesa. The colonel hung back and stayed behind as they began threading through the thick growth of lodgepole pines.

"We'll ride until we get to the edge of the timber," Sheriff Kruse said, "then I figure we should get down and wait till dark."

"The devil with waiting," Idaho said. "Let me get to that Gordon and the thousand dollars for him dead."

"That reward doesn't apply to you men," Colonel Ball said. "I pay you each plenty as it is. That was only an inducement to get some of the citizens to make a posse."

"You didn't make out so good," Idaho said. "I didn't see nobody coming to help."

"It looks," Sheriff Kruse said, "as if you ought to be glad to pay us to keep us on your side."

"I pay you," Colonel Ball said. "I pay you plenty."

They had climbed up the slope and come out in a more open grove on a bench of the mesa. The sheriff and Idaho reined in and waited for the colonel to ride up between them.

"You know, Kruse," Idaho said, "I was thinking, seeing Bowie dead and everything like it was at the bank, all kind of gone to thunder. I was thinking, if you and me took over the bank and—"

"What's going on here?" Colonel Ball demanded. His hand moved up toward his shoulder-holstered gun. "What kind of talk is this?"

"I've been thinking along some other lines," Sheriff Kruse said. "Being sick and tired of doing all your dirty work, Colonel, and getting told off in public like it was my own idea. I've been thinking there ought to be an even split on the profits of this whole business. Take the little jobs we've done for you. Of course it was Bowie that knocked Gordon over the head trying to dig up Blue Harmon's body. But he's dead and don't matter. It was me that shot Loony Tate to order and it was Idaho that set fire to the livery stable so he'd have a chance to rifle down Gordon when everybody was at the fire. That was all to your order, and we ought to get even shares with you in all this big business you been cooking up for yourself."

"That's ridiculous," Colonel Ball said. "That's—blackmail."

"I been wondering, Kruse," Idaho drawled, "why couldn't we finish off the colonel right here, then go on and get them records from these tinhorn owlhoots at the cabin and take over the whole business—bank, land, town and everything? You're still sheriff, Kruse, and I'd be your deputy. We get rid of Gordon and his men and there wouldn't be nothin' to stop us. I'd even let you make the speech when the railroad gets to town next Saturday, Kruse. Only first, we got to take care of the colonel here."

"I'll be glad to save you that trouble," a voice said from behind a broad pine trunk.

Eyes turned. Hands leaped for guns.

"Keep your hands up," the voice said. "This scatter-gun has double charges in each barrel and it don't miss."

"Where did you come from, Hack Midland?" Colonel Ball roared.

"Well," Hack said, "after Lute and I rode out of town, I left him and circled back to see what happened. I followed you three when you hit the timber, then I rode on ahead and waited for you."

"Get him, Idaho!" Colonel Ball rasped.

"Hold it," Rod Gordon called from behind the three. "Hold that gunfire, Hack. We're going to take in these three on what we've heard and what the records show. I've already looked into some of the records and I find—"

"You're not cheating me out this time!" Hack yelled. "This time I get even or I'll never stop hearing them horses of mine screaming as they burned."

His big gun roared, first one barrel and then the other.

Colonel Ball leaped in his saddle, clutched at his head and throat and slowly pitched to the right out of his saddle, to fall in a red heap along the pine needles on the timber floor.

Idaho sat rigid in his saddle with his twin guns in his hands. Then weakness seemed to take possession of his wiry little body and he began falling apart. The guns fell out of his hands and his head lopped forward. His body jerked, then sprawled out of the saddle.

Sheriff Kruse had half-turned in his saddle and was staring at Rod Gordon.

"You never would dare draw with me, would you, Gordon?" he said.

ROD stood with his guns trained on him. "Get down, Kruse. I'm taking you in for trial."

"Every time we met, you tricked me," Kruse taunted. "You took me by surprise this time, too, didn't you, Gordon?"

Rod Gordon's face was expressionless. His shoulders shrugged slightly. He suddenly dropped his guns in their holsters and stood waiting.

"All right, Kruse. You've been asking for this. I'm offering you a fair trial, according to law. But if you're determined to—"

Rod Gordon never finished that sentence. He saw Kruse go for his guns and almost snap them out of his holsters. Then the former ruckus-raising kid of La Mesa drew and the movement was a blur.

His guns were roaring before Kruse could cock his hammers.

Kruse dropped his guns and swayed in the saddle. His arms hung limp and his shoulders dripped blood.

Ed Lathrop came running through the timber, holding his guns ready. He paused a few feet away, stood staring.

"You got him! Both shoulders."

"We'll be saving him for trial before an honest court," Rod said. "Take care of him, Ed. Don't let him die, if you can help it."

Rod holstered his guns and turned.

The shadowy form of a girl showed in the twilight. She was trying to run to them, lifting her long skirts. Rod hurried to her and blocked her way.

"You wouldn't want to see it," he said. "Come on back to the cabin and I'll tell you, if you've got to know."

She turned. He took her arm.

"My father?"

Rod nodded. "Hack Midland was waiting with his shotgun. He got Idaho, too, for setting his stable on fire. Ed Lathrop's going to try to save Sheriff Kruse for trial."

He felt Maxine sway and he put his arm about her. They walked slowly. She bowed her head.

"Now, I'll tell you what Doc Dixon said about you," Rod went on. "He said he thought you were just about the finest girl that ever walked the streets of La Mesa."

She didn't answer. He felt her shiver with a sob.

"For my part," Rod said softly, "I agree."

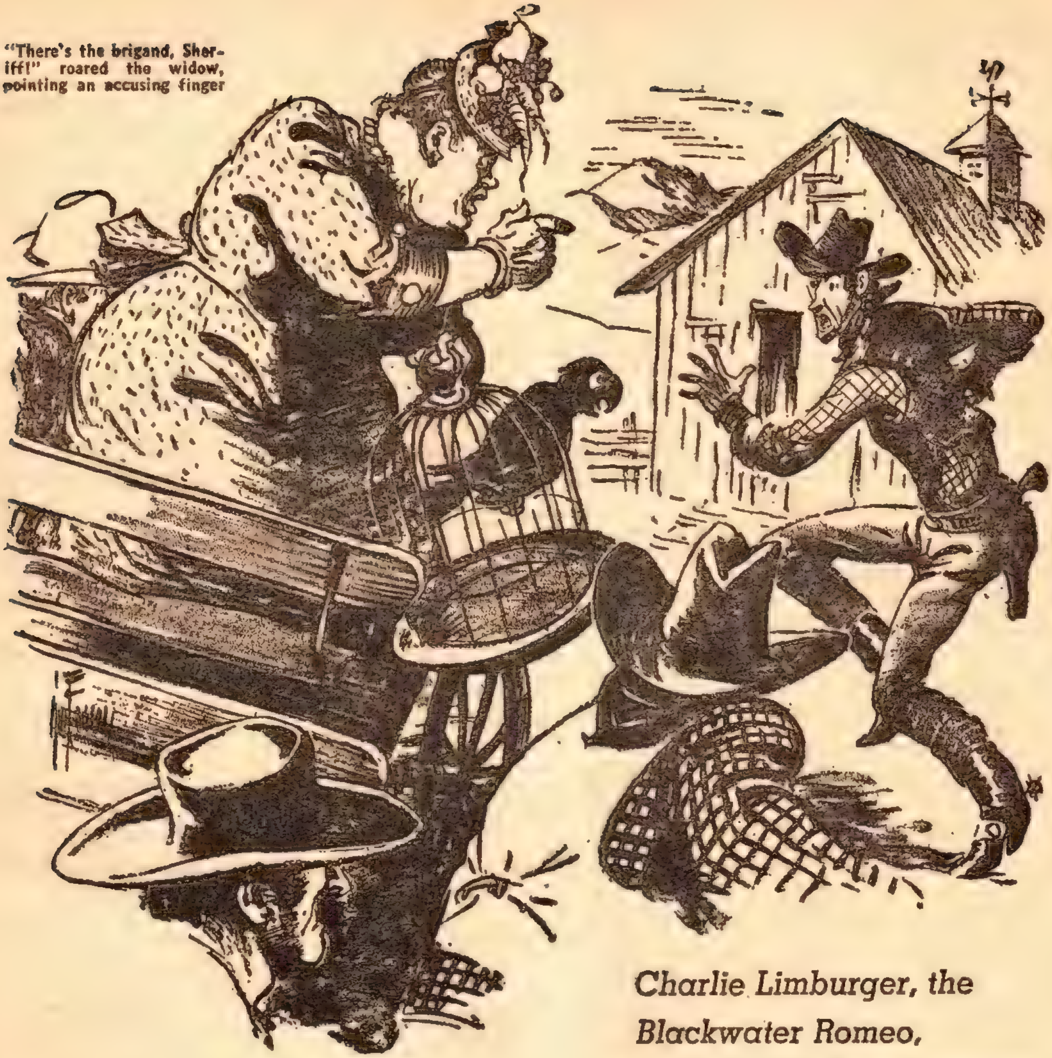
A MAN'S BEST FRIEND IS HIS GUN!

THAT'S the conclusion Kim Logan reaches when all his ideals find betrayal and his dissatisfaction flares into the fury of rebellion. Kim bears the title of "Master of Guncraft" for the Clawhammer, a big ranch owned by lovely Peg Cody—and though he's a rough, tough trouble-shooter, he follows an honorable code until treachery turns him into a savage avenger! Look forward to a great new epic of the range—

NO LAW IN PASS CREEK VALLEY

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

A THRILL-PACKED COMPLETE ACTION NOVEL—FEATURED NEXT ISSUE!



"There's the brigand, Sheriff!" roared the widow, pointing an accusing finger

Charlie Limburger, the Blackwater Romeo, gives romance a bad odor!

SOMETHING IN A NAME

By FRANCIS H. AMES

AS THE Milwaukee passenger train pulled out of the Montana cowtown of Blackwater it left a rather bulky female standing in the rain on the deserted boardwalk like a baffled water buffalo. Her vegetable and fruit ornamented bonnet hung limply down over her weather beaten features. Her pale blue eyes, which were well crinkled at the corners from good humor, now were clouded with wrath.

She was dressed in heavy clothes and stout brogans, and held a dog house shaped valise in one hand and a parrot cage in the other. The parrot, a large green bird with a sour eye and scimitar bladed beak, expressed its indignation with the downpour as it ruffled its brilliant plumage.

"Awwarrk," it screeched. "Man the life boats—the deck's awash."

At this moment a surrey, hauled by a sleek and apparently very salty pair of bays, drew up at the station hitch rack and a short, bowlegged, and rather dignified gent lowered himself carefully to the ground. He immediately started toward the depot entrance, following his long nose, which issued above a fierce russet colored mustache now drooping disconsolately in the rain. He proceeded with the uncertain steps of one who is not quite aware of where he's headed.

The large woman, moving with a speed that was surprising in one of her bulk, leaped over to intercept the man's progress. She planted herself firmly in his path and poked him in the center with the point of her black parasol with a rapier like thrust.

"Where," she bellowed in a raucous voice, "is Charlie Limburger? What's your name?"

The little man recoiled from the punishing thrust like a startled elk.

"Don't know the critter, ma'am," he quavered. "Sounds like some sort of cheese."

"Pour it on him, cap'n, pour it on him," the parrot squawked, thrusting its beak out and clacking its bill at the man's leg.

"Cheese!" roared the woman, pointing the umbrella at the jasper like a spear, her eyes snapping with exasperation.

"Cheese!" she howled. "You dim-wit! Does cheese write a lady love letters and proposals of marriage?

"Marriage—love letters?" gulped the character, gazing at the woman's warlike and leathery countenance in awe. "Who in time would do a thing like that? They ain't no gent around these parts by that name."

"Listen, mister," grated the beefy woman, "I came two thousand miles to marry that feller. He's here and I'll find him!"

THIS declaration seemed to bring the short man out of his daze. He swept his big Stetson off, exposing a half bald dome, and crossing it over his spindly chest, he bowed low.

"Colonel Augustas Rumple from Kentucky, at yore service, ma'am," he orated. "Permit me to drive you to the hotel. We'll run the high smellin' scoundrel to earth in no time."

The lady reached out with a brawny arm and siezed the colonel by the vest front, jerking him to her with such force that his booted and spurred heels left the ground. She buried her nose in the man's whiskers and sniffed audibly before setting him back on his pins like she'd set down a salt shaker.

"You're drunk," she accused, rooting the man to the spot with her piercing eye. "Ah well, my husband, the late Captain Lee of Boston, allus said a hooker of rum would hurt no man."

"Not that you're a man, mind you, Colonel," she added hastily, "You appears a mite spindlin' to me."

The colonel jerked his rumpled vest down over his stomach, straightened his narrow shoulders and puffed out his chest.

"I'm a gentleman from Kentucky, ma'am," he declared as he put on his Stetson. Twisting his black handled six-gun around into view, he picked up the woman's valise and strutted toward his rig. "I don't argue with no fine lady like you, but Colonel Augustas Rumple is a hombre to be reckoned with."

The colonel gallantly assisted the lady into his rig, shoving from the rear like he was ramming a cow into a loading chute, and weaved around to get in himself and pick up the ribbons.

"We has only one hotel in Blackwater, lady," he said apologetically. "I'll have to take you there."

"Hotel, my eye!" exploded the female. "Take me to the sheriff!"

"Sheriff," gasped the colonel, turning pale, "My good woman, have you been rolled?"

"Rolled!" bellowed the female, leaning over to shove her face within inches of the driver's. "I been hoodwinked into this God forsaken country by a promise of marriage. I want the law to haul this Charley Limburger gent in here for the ceremony."

The colonel lashed the startled bays into a full gallop, took the corner on one wheel and shot up the muddy street of Blackwater like his tail was afire.

"Port your helm," squawked the parrot, snapping its razor-like beak in the colonel's dripping whiskers, "we're on the reefs!"

The broncs hauled up before Sheriff

Paul Walker's office, which sat beside a leaning and dilapidated building. A peeling and red painted sign announced this was the Blackwater saloon. Loud and boisterous laughter issued from behind the bat-wings. The bays shied off from this animated conversation while the doughty colonel stood up on his bowed legs and manfully tried to coax them up to walk. Failing in this, he leaped from the surrey, wound the ribbons around the whipstock and held his thin arms up to the lady.

"Permit me, Mrs. Lee," he smirked, "to carry you to the walk."

"Man the life boats, *awaarrk*!" shrieked the parrot. "The deck's awash."

The lady picked up her valise in one hand, the parrot cage in the other and gazed down at the little colonel with some doubt. Then, noting the knee deep mud in which the man's boots were anchored she apparently made up her mind to take a chance.

"Uummph," she snorted, " You're a gentleman anyway, Colonel,"

She stepped off into the colonel's waiting arms just as the bat wings of the saloon burst open and several men charged through the door. They stood there, a stunned and motley crew, gazing at the unbelievable sight that met their eyes.

The colonel received his weighty burden with a visible bending of the nether extremities. For a moment he swayed, attempting to pull one foot out of the mud. Then he toppled over backward, tossing the lady, valise, umbrella, and parrot, face down in the mire.

MRS. LEE turned over like a rolling bronco, wiping the gumbo from her features—the parrot reached out from its overturned cage to sink its fangs in the nigh bronc's fetlock.

The results were instantaneous and explosive. The team took off in a prodigious bound. The colonel bent over in his mired boots and frantically grasped the tail gate, only to be whisked out of his footgear in the twinkling of an eye. The whole outfit streamed down the street with the doughty colonel hanging on for dear life to the rear.

Mrs. Lee heaved to her feet, snapping the mud from her big hands. Suddenly she became acutely aware of the boisterous laughter that was going on behind her massive rear. She wheeled like an embattled buffalo, and charged into the group from the saloon, laying about with her umbrella with utmost abandon.

"Laugh, you ignorant porpoises!" she roared, driving Pete Conner's sombrero down over his ears with a swishing blow. "Clear the decks, you rummies, afore I have you clapped in irons!"

As one man the crowd fled into the saloon—all save Conners, who, blinded by his down driven Stetson, plowed cranium first into the side of the building. He staggered back like a man who had been kicked by a mule, dropped to his hands and knees and crawled under the bat wings, shaking his head in utter bewilderment.

Mrs. Lee stood, spraddle legged in the downpour, her bonnet brim drooping around her ears, while its ornate vegetables stood up in varnished brilliance. She glowered about as though looking for further opponents to attack. Far down the street there was a rending crash as the colonel's team bolted through the livery barn door, leaving the wreck of the surrey across the front of the building. The colonel himself, crawled painfully from the remains, got slowly to his bare feet, wrenched a crick out of his back and came forward again, intent on gaining the side of the hefty female.

"This," muttered the lady, retrieving her parrot cage from the street, "is the scurviest port I ever sailed into. Now to see the harbor authorities."

Spotting the sheriff's sign next door she picked up her parrot and strode through the door to come feet to face with Sheriff Paul Walker. This worthy individual was tilted back in his chair, with his bootless feet on top of his desk. One big toe stuck out from his worn socks like a bald headed gopher peering out of the ground. Loud snores issued from Walker's beefy countenance.

Mrs. Lee gazed at the man in disgust as she carefully set the parrot cage on the desk and prepared for a poke at the sleeping official's gizzard. Such methods, she had found, in her long sea faring life, usually brought instant attention. They were not necessary, however, on this occasion.

The parrot, considerably rumpled by now, both in feathers and in temper, reached out and clamped on the sheriff's big bare toe with amazing accuracy. The officer erupted like a circus trained walrus. His feet flew in the air, tossing parrot and cage over his head as he turned a somersault, chair and all.

"Lazy heathen," remarked Mrs. Lee, as Walker burst from beneath his chair, whipping out a long-barreled Colt and spinning around like an empty beer keg.

"What in time's going on around here?" he bellowed.

"Haul down the top-gallants," screamed the parrot, hanging upside down from the perch in its cage, which now lay on top the county safe, "there's a blow in the offing."

The colonel, having retrieved his boots, burst through the door at that moment to charge up and shake a thin finger under the bewildered sheriff's bulbous nose.

"I tell you," he roared, "that this lady here has been lured into the wilderness by a scoundrel—a utter scoundrel, sir—by the name of Charley Limburger. Make up a posse, Sheriff, and run the deceivin' monster down. We'll string him up like a mangy coyote."

"Shut up!" barked Walker, shoving his red face nose to nose with Rumple. "What in time bit me—my toe's bleeding?"

"Yore ears'll be bleedin', mister," snorted Mrs. Lee, "if you don't get out and run this Limburger gent down. He promised to marry me when I showed up. Now he ain't here."

"Well, I'll be a plugged punkin!" ejaculated Walker, looking at the outraged female. "We'd better see the mayor about this."

THE THREE trooped down the hall to the mayor's office. Walker pounded on the door with the butt of his forty-five.

"Open up, Totten," he roared, "there is a female critter out here wants to get married."

The mayor of Blackwater was a man of many offices. He was not only the mayor, he was also the justice of the peace, and the town undertaker. His services were more often required for the latter office as the town's business affairs were few, and women for weddings were practically non-existent. On the other hand, expired gents were fairly numerous.

He rose from his desk now, a tall, thin, narrow skulled, long nosed jasper, with dark eyes, hair, and complexion. He peered uncertainly about through thick glassed spectacles. He had the racy appearance of a crow—beak and all.

"Lead the unfortunate victims forward, Sheriff," he croaked, "and I'll tie the matrimonial knot in no time."

"Let me see now," he muttered, as he produced a battered Bible from his littered desk, "how does the thing go? Ladies and gents we gather together to plant this here gun-slingin' hombre— No, it ain't thataway. . . . Let's see now: feller citizens, this heifer and this hairpin is here to be joined in the holy bonds of matrimony—"

The impressive ceremony was strangled off in mid speech as the widow reached out and hooked her umbrella handle around the mayor of Blackwater's skinny neck and yanked the dignified official toward her like a foul hooked tuna.

"Stow the bilge, you black livered barracuda," she bawled, "and hunt up Charley Limburger. He's the gent what promised to marry me."

"Limburger," croaked the half strangled man. "They ain't no such gent—that's cheese."

"Cheese," bellowed Mrs. Lee, unhooking the parasol handle and gathering in the man's shirt front in one big mitt. "The next feller that says cheese to me again gets tossed in irons."

"Easy there, ma'am, easy there!" soothed the sheriff. "Suppose you tell us the dastardly details of this case—then the law'll go to work in short order. Paul Walker allus gets his man."

"Yes, ma'am," echoed Colonel Rumple. "Tell us the sad story, and we'll pursue the culprit high, wide, and handsome."

"You," declared Mrs. Lee, pinning the little colonel to the wall with one stubby finger, "keep out of this. I don't want no weazened deck hand like you messin' up this cruise."

"Yes, ma'am," quavered Rumple, looking up at the lady wistfully.

"Now," she orated, "I'm Mrs. Rose Lee, widder o' the late Captain Horace Lee. His schooner went down with all hands off the New England coast three-year back." She wiped a huge tear from her eye.

"This Limburger gent gets my name from a marryin' agency, and we writ back and forth. Then the gent wants me to come out here and marry up with him. He says he'll be waitin' at the depot when I arrives.

"He ain't," she declared sadly, "as you kin all see."

"Perhaps," said the sheriff cautiously, "the gent was there, and snuck off. Did you give him any warnin', so to speak, like sendin' him a pitcher. Maybe the miserable critter fainted."

The widow glanced at the officer suspiciously.

"Yes, I did," she said hastily, "not my own, of course, but one I found in the late Captain Lee's sea bag. My husband allus was a good judge of women folks—had a sharp eye, he did—so I figured she'd do. She was sorta skinny, foreign lookin' female, come to think about it. Charley didn't send me none, but he said he was tall, dark, and handsome, and had a good job on the Weddin' Ring ranch.

"Weddin' Ring ranch!" echoed the sheriff. "They ain't got no gent out there by that name. By Gravy, there shore is somethin' that smells powerful about this here case."

"You're right, sheriff," croaked the undertaker. "It's this Limburger hairpin."

"I dunno," declared Rumple, "about this Weddin' Ring crew. They takes on new men right along. Let's ride out and see."

"Let's," growled Walker, ominously tightening up his cartridge belt, "Let's—somethin' smells to high heaven."

"Limburger," croaked the undertaker as they went out the door.

"Seein' Totten, here, is the mayor, justice of the peace, and undertaker, we'd better take him along, Mrs. Lee," said Sheriff Walker.

"Guess we'd better at that," the widow said. "If we ketch Charley and he's willin' to go through with the deal, he kin marry us.

"If he ain't," she muttered darkly, "this long legged eel kin sew him in canvas and heave his remains over the gunwale."

FOR AN instant the Colonel looked at Mrs. Lee in open admiration. The parrot made a vicious snap at his leg, causing him to leap sideways in panic. "Stand by the life-boats, men!" it squawked. "The deck's awash."

Although the livery man supplied them with a surrey to be hitched to the colonel's bays, he did it with considerable reluctance, gazing at the shattered remains of Rumple's rig against the front wall.

"Them hosses of yourn jest ain't safe fer no rig, Rumple," he declared.

They set out across the sage flats with the widow and the Colonel in the front seat while the sheriff and the mayor of Blackwater bounced about in the rear.

The rain had ceased now, and the sun shone brightly.

"Just like the Captain's schooner in a choppy sea," remarked the lady as she settled her bulk into the seat. "I'll like it here."

They arrived at the buildings of the Wedding Ring spread around noon and drove down in the ward where the owner, Ralph Latham, strolled out to meet them. He was a large, slow moving man with a friendly grin which changed to astonishment as he lamped the strange outfit. "Pour it on him," screamed the parrot. "Pour it on him!"

The sheriff heaved his bulk to the ground.

"This here," he said, pointing at Mrs. Lee, "is Mrs. Rose Lee, late of Boston. Seems like some scurvy hairpin on yore payroll got her name from one of these marryin' stockyards and has been writing her tender love letters, so to speak. The slick jasper up and asks her to come out here and marry up with him. She shows this mornin' and there simply ain't no such gent."

The rancher gazed at the lady's leathery countenance, his eye cautiously taking in the bird at her side.

"Well," he gasped at last, swallowin' his cud, "If that don't take the rag off'n the brush. How do you figger that this yeller livered scoundrel is one of my men?"

"Simple," declared the sheriff. "He said he worked here and he give yore town mail box fer a address. Besides, the lady's sentimental epistles is delivered because the gent answers 'em every time, accordin' to Mrs. Lee."

"Well, what do you know about that!" growled Latham. "Which one of my boys was it? We'll hang him."

"Charley Limburger was the gent's

name," snapped the widow, speaking for the first time. "Either you produce him, mister, or I'll tear your place down —beam and spar."

"Beam and spar!" echoed the rancher. "But lady, we ain't got no hairpin by that name here. Sounds like some sort of cheese."

"*Cheese*!" bellowed Mrs. Lee, starting to climb out of the rig, "One more crack out of you, mister, and I'll cheese your neck."

"Now, now, ma'am," soothed Walker. "Course they ain't no gent here by that name. This owl-hoot has been a'toyin' with your affections, so as to speak, while he hides in the brush behind a alias. There ain't no such a feller with that handle."

"To blazes with all this palaver!" suddenly shouted the Colonel, leaping down and fingering his Colt menacingly. "I ain't goin' to stand around no longer while such shenanigans is bein' pulled on this here fine lady. I'm goin' to run the guilty party to the ground and telegraph him home, pronto."

The widow gazed at the little man speculatively, a glint of admiration creeping into her eyes.

"Talks," she remarked, half to herself, "almost like Captain Lee did afore he went down with all hands.

"Still," she said speculatively, "he's as spindly as a half starved pilchard."

At that moment a tall, dark-haired, lantern jawed puncher approached from the corral. He was a sad looking individual, long legged, pigeon toed, and innocent looking.

The parrot stuck its head out of the cage and fastened its bleak yellow eye on this character with evident suspicion.

"Sam Limburger, Sam Limburger," it suddenly squawked. "*Awarrk!*"

The startled ranch hand hauled up short—utterly astounded.

"My gosh!" he stuttered. "A talkin' buzzard! The thing's green."

"There's the brigand, Sheriff," reared the widow, pointing an accusing finger at the man. "He said he was tall, dark, and handsome."

OMINOUSLY the woman started to climb out of the rig, her predatory eye fastened on the puncher like an Indian snake charmer. The man started to back away, feeling cautiously behind him for secure footing. Suddenly he whirled and fled, racing for the safety of the barn, his pipe stem legs flinging around like straws in the breeze. The widow, knowing that she could not achieve such velocity afoot, sank back into the buckboard seat, snatched the reins, twitched the whip from the stock, and brought the lash down on the backs of the startled team.

The rig went bounding off in pursuit of the fleeing hairpin, with the crow-like undertaker bounding around in the rear, clutching his Stetson down around his ears with both clawlike hands.

"Haul in the top-gallants," screamed the parrot, its cage rolling around on the seat beside the yelling widow. "The deck's awash."

"After him, Sheriff!" roared Rumple. "That's the guilty party."

"That's Hank Tooter," gasped Latham, "I don't think it's him."

"His name don't make no never mind," shouted Walker. "They ain't no jasper by the name of Limburger anyways."

As one man the trio bounded off in pursuit of the leaping buggy.

The fleeing man glanced over his shoulder, and, taking in the ever growing numbers of his pursuers, increased his speed, clawing for traction with his boot heels, and whisked through the open doorway of the barn like a string halted jack rabbit.

Mrs. Lee had been aboard many a hooker that had pounded through the narrow reefs of storm tossed islands—she was not to be daunted by something as simple as a barn doorway. She steered the galloping team unerringly through opening and down the passage way between the stalls. As the rear wheels passed over the door jamb the long nosed undertaker turned a somersault in the rear seat. He landed back in the rig, but his thick lensed spectacles flipped over the back to lay winking in the sun, leaving the man practically blind.

"Port your helm!" screeched the excited parrot, "*Awwaark!* Port your helm—we're on the rocks!"

The frightened cowhand tried to climb the hay ladder but the rig was too close upon him so he darted through the rear door. This opening was not as wide as the front one had been, nevertheless, the pursuing team, urged on by the mighty widow, passed through it with only the loss of the surrey top and a few boards from the side of the barn.

The bays cleared the pig-pen fence in one bound as the parrot cage and the cadaverous and half blinded undertaker rolled out the back, and passed on to wind up against the corral fence with a splintering crash. Mrs. Lee was catapulted from her seat half way through the springy poles of the corral where she stuck firmly, yelling at one end and waving her brogans wildly at the other.

The undertaker landed, face down, in the hog trough, rolled from it dripping with slops and charged blindly into the pig-pen fence. This limber arrangement tossed him neatly back into the trough again. He rose, weaving on his pins to approach the fence cautiously, feeling for it with his skinny hands. He carefully and painfully climbed the obstruction to his progress, and was perched precariously on the top board like a black feathered sandhill crane when the parrot reached out and gripped a large porker by the ear.

This peaceable animal had been sturdily standing its ground as the bewildering stampede passed over, and was now innocently gazing at the peculiar creature that had been twice flung in its feed trough. However, when the parrot closed its pincher-like beak on the startled animal's tender ear it emitted a squeal like a rusty hinge and catapulted through the fence beneath the luckless mayor of Blackwater. This sudden cannonading of his perch promptly pinwheeled the man into the air. He once more lit face down in the hog trough.

"Well, I'll be a stuffed eagle," he moaned, as he sat up in the wooden vessel, holding his narrow skull in his hands.

The hog, emerging from the pen with the cage, dangling parrot firmly latched to its ear, shot like a cannon ball between the legs of the running men. Colonel Rumple, having a head start, was in the fore, and so escaped the terrific impact of the porker. The galloping sheriff, however, and the rancher went down like they'd been struck by lightning in a whirling mass of flying arms, legs, porker, bird cage, and parrot.

"Hell's fire!" screamed the bird. "The ship's aground!"

Colonel Rumple continued on his way to chase Hank Tooter around and around the corral.

"Halt, you renegade!" he bellowed, waving his cocked Colt.

ROSE LEE braced her tremendous arms against the poles that held her trapped, and dropped to the ground. Hank Tooter was rapidly gaining on the shorter legged Colonel when she sprang up in his face.

"I've got you now, Sam Limburger," she bellowed, lunging at him.

The cowboy slid to a halt, twisted his lanky body, and climbed the corral fence like a hysterical grey squirrel. Rose Lee grasped his legs as he reached the top pole and hauled him back with all her might.

The colonel flung open the gate and dashed inside.

"Hands up," he roared, waving his six-gun in the air.

The widow had Tooter stretched out like a green hide, with the top pole of the corral, to which the man clung for dear life, bent like an enormous bow. At this point the puncher's boots flipped off in the widow's hands and the suddenly released Tooter shot through the air like a human arrow. He struck the dancing Rumple, head on, and the two went down in a shower of dust as the Colonel's forty-five exploded in the air.

Walker and the rancher, having extricated themselves from the hog, parrot, and undertaker, dashed in, collared the dazed fugitive and jerked him to his feet. Rumple still squirmed on the ground, blue in the face and desperately trying to recover his knocked out wind. His whiskers waved like the tail of a defiant polecat as he grasped for breath.

"Ah-ha!" grated Sheriff Walker. "We've ketched you red-handed, mister. I ain't looked up the law yet, but I reckon deceivin' a lady is a hangin' offense in this here county."

"So," hissed the widow, running up to confront the man, "You're the pirate who was to meet me at the station—You're the gent what writ me all them powerful love letters!"

She turned to the half crippled undertaker who wobbled up, guided by their voices.

"You're the justice of the peace. You long legged sea serpent, get out the

Good Book and start the ceremony."

"I never writ no letters," howled Hank Tooter. "I can't write noways."

"By gravy!" exploded the rancher. "He can't fer a fact. He signs the payroll with an X."

"Well I'll be a short-horned heifer," groaned Rumple, finally staggering to his feet, "We are right back where we started from."

"Can't write?" gasped Rose Lee. "Oh, you poor boy! Why then did you run?"

"Run!" howled Totten. "Why wouldn't I run with that talkin' bird bellerin' at me and your folks howlin' bloody murder?"

The sheriff glared around, a baffled look in his eyes.

"There's somethin' that shore does smell peculiar about this here deal," he snorted ominously.

"Limburger," croaked the undertaker, rubbing his rapidly closing eye.

"We'll wait," declared Latham, "until the crew rides in this evenin'. Maybe the lady kin pick the guilty party out'n them. In the meantime, let's eat—I'm half starved."

Latham was a widower himself, and employed a Chinese cook. In no time the group were seated at the table in the ranch house, stuffing their gullets with prime grub.

"Most peculiar deal I ever encountered," declared Latham. "You say you sent this love letter writin' jasper yore picture, ma'am? Maybe the thing scared him off." He gazed at the woman's map cautiously.

FEARING an explosion from this lefthanded remark the sheriff hastily explained:

"Mrs. Lee didn't have no pitcher of herself so she sends one her late husband brung back from foreign ports."

"Oh," snorted Latham. "I see how it was now. Maybe the gent did meet the train and snuck off when he seen—"

He broke off suddenly as he caught the lady's wrathful eye.

"Well," she sniffed, "maybe I ain't as good lookin' as that there female in the picture I sent Limburger, but I'll bet I kin cook better and do more work. Man in this country needs a good strong woman for a wife."

She peered at the Chinese cook as he padded in with more food—his bland face utterly expressionless. She savored the food in her mouth.

"Well," she said again, "this feller here kin cook, but does he keep a clean galley? I'll take a look and see."

With this remark she arose from her chair and waddled into the kitchen. She stood in the door, transfixed as she pointed one big finger straight at the far wall.

"There," she roared, "is the pitcher I sent Limburger—pasted right up in plain sight. Some one around this vessel is lyin'."

The men sprang from the table to dash into the room, gathering around the photograph to gaze at it with admiration.

"By gravy,!" chortled the sheriff. "Ain't she a looker though!"

"She shore is," gasped Colonel Rumple, "but she's a Chinese lady, sure as shootin'."

"She is fer a fact!" exploded the rancher.

HE WHIRLED on the cook, who now backed away in the corner, his face white with fear.

"Charley," he roared. "Did you put that picture up there? Did you write those letters? Don't lie to me. You went to school in San Francisco. You kin write."

"American lady," whined the frightened cook, "named Rose Lee—send me picture of pretty China woman. I think she Chinese girl until she get off train."

Understanding flooded across the bulky lady's face just as Colonel Rumple let a howl out of him and charged across the room at the cook, his face red with wrath.

"I'll teach you," he bellowed, "to write love letters to this innocent heifer!"

The widow reached out a brawny arm, picked up a huge bowl of sour dough and hurled it straight at the face of the charging Rumple.

"Leave the boy alone," she yelled. "It was my own darn fool fault!"

A female that has flung belayin' pins clear across the deck of a heavin' and storm tossed steamer isn't apt to miss at ten feet with a ten quart bowl. The missile struck the onrushing Rumple full in the whiskers, submerging him to the ears and flipping him backward like a roped steer.

As he turned turtle in the corner, banging his head on the floor the widow howled with anguish and knelt to wipe the sticky mess from his whiskers with her dress.

"Pour it on him," screeched the parrot. "Sam Limburger, *arrawwk*!"

"I help nice missy wipe off," said the chuckling Chinese as he knelt beside her with a damp cloth.

As the eyes of the half strangled colonel opened under their joint ministrations, the widow smiled down at the man, her face lighted up until she appeared to be almost handsome.

"Never did see a hand like you, Colonel," she said, "fer gettin' in the way of things. What you need," she added tenderly, "is a big, strong woman like me to look after you."

"Pour it on him, pour it on him," screamed the parrot, peering suspiciously at the group on the floor.

"Yeah," drawled Latham, "pour it on him, lady. He's got a pretty big spread to take care of. He sure does need a woman out there."

He looked at Rose Lee with great respect.

"I knowed," declared the sheriff, "that there was somethin' what smelled mighty powerful about this here deal. What is this Chinese gent's name anyways?"

"Limburger," croaked the undertaker, nursing his black eye.

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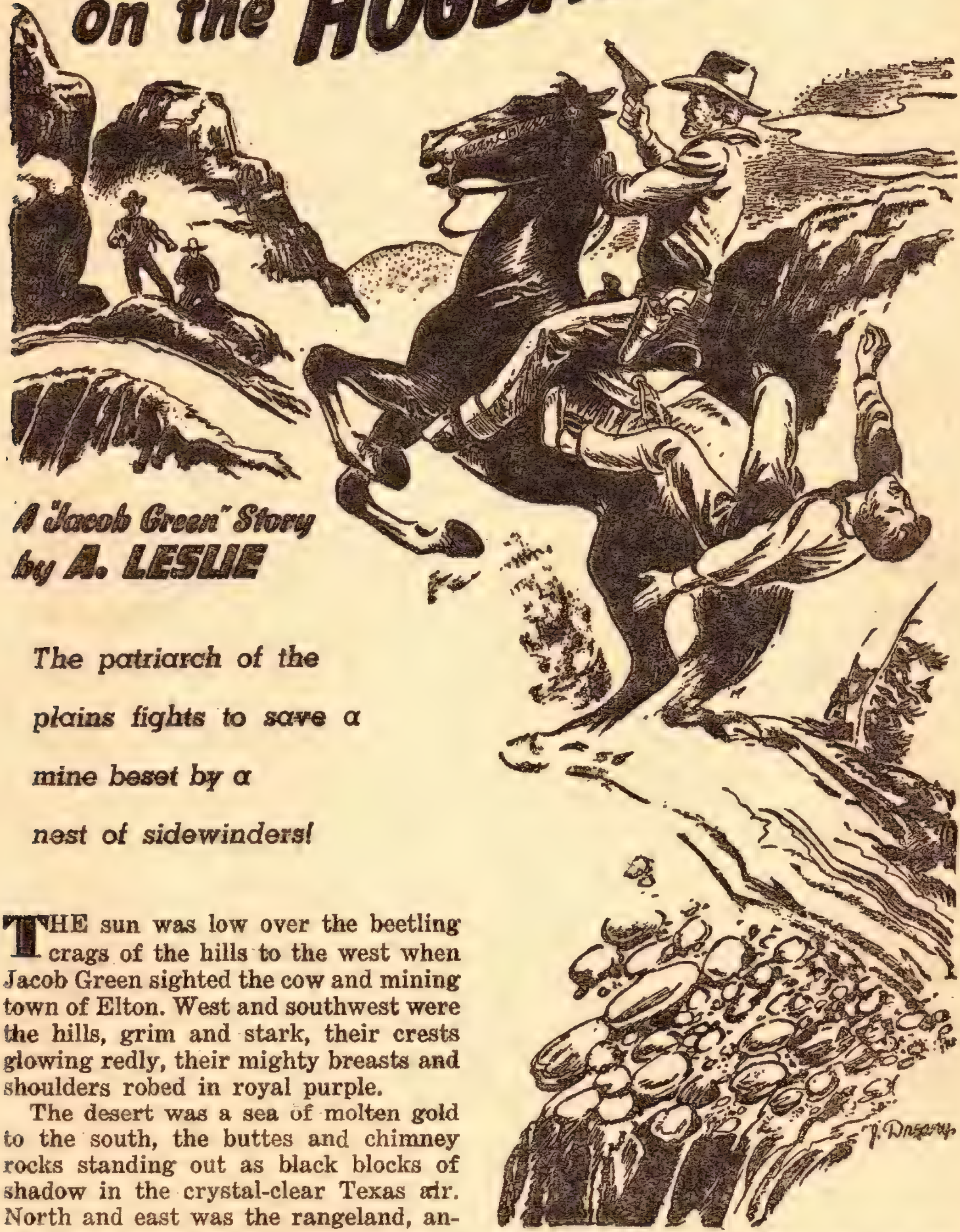


Green fought to get the frenzied horse under control as Miguel fell

THE sun was low over the beetling crags of the hills to the west when Jacob Green sighted the cow and mining town of Elton. West and southwest were the hills, grim and stark, their crests glowing redly, their mighty breasts and shoulders robed in royal purple.

The desert was a sea of molten gold to the south, the buttes and chimney rocks standing out as black blocks of shadow in the crystal-clear Texas air. North and east was the rangeland, another sea, but a sea of emerald tipped with amethyst, rippling like gentle waves as the wind stirred the grasses.

Directly ahead, cradled in the shadow of the hills, was the cowtown, a huddle of shacks and 'dobes and false fronts, with Clate Martin's Imperial Saloon hunching up like a weatherbeaten swan amid a jostle of ducklings.

Set a little to one side was Pedro Castro's store, a neat building with a veranda. Toward the store Jacob Green turned his tall bay horse.

Jacob Green was a rather small man, wide of shoulder, deep of chest, with a lined face that was full of peace. The hair sweeping back in a glorious crinkly mane from his big dome-shaped forehead was almost white. Almost white also was his short beard. But his twinkling brown eyes were bright, and clean as a hawk's. His activity and endurance were unimpaired, and from a distance he seemed to have the supple, lithe grace of a youth of twenty.

Jacob Green dismounted in front of the veranda and let the split reins fall to the ground. As he mounted the steps, a smiling young Mexican, walking with a crutch, limped out to greet him.

"Welcome, Uncle Jake!" he cried, speaking unaccented English. "Come in and take a load off your feet. I spotted you coming over the ridge and I've got a bottle of the right vintage ready to open." They shook hands warmly and entered the store together.

Pedro Castro had been a cowhand. He had been smashed up in a stampede. A broken leg had been badly set, healed imperfectly and would not bear his weight. Jacob Green had helped Pedro set up in the store business and freighted him goods from his own big general store in Maley, nearly a hundred miles to the west. Pedro could not ride and Jacob Green, out of the kindness of his heart, several times made the journey through rough country to confer with his protege, advise him and arrange for the replenishing of needed stocks.

As he sat down in the chair Pedro indicated, Jacob Green noticed a boy of about twelve or fourteen standing behind the corner. One glance was enough to tell him the youngster was a full-blood Yaqui Indian. He had a clean-cut, intelligent face, a good mouth and steady black eyes. He was rather light-skinned for a Yaqui. Jacob Green's deeply bronzed face was almost as dark.

"Hello?" Green remarked. "Where did you get the *muchacho?*"

"I have him living with me," Pedro replied. "I'm taking care of him. His father and mother died of smallpox. He had it, too, but I managed to pull him through unscarred."

Jacob Green shot the Mexican a keen glance. "You ever had smallpox, Pedro?" he asked. The Mexican smilingly shook his head. "Ever been vaccinated against the disease?"

"No, I never have," Pedro admitted.

"And you nursed a case of it! Hmmm!"

"El Dios was good; I did not contract the malady," Pedro said.

Jacob Green nodded. His glance shifted to the Indian boy, who was regarding him steadily and in silence.

"Come here, Miguel, and shake hands with the Senor Green," Pedro invited.

The boy came forward, with the lithe grace of a panther, and shook hands with a firm grip. "How do?" he said in soft, liquid accents. Then, relapsing into Spanish, and turning his eyes toward Pedro; *"Bueno hombre."*

"You're darn right Uncle Jake is a good man, in more ways than one," Pedro chuckled.

"He speaks Spanish quite well, but I'm teaching him English," he explained to Jacob Green. "I hope to bring him up to become what an *Americano* gentleman should be, and generally is—which is to my mind the highest rank that a man can reach on this earth of ours."

"You can say that double, Pedro," Jacob Green returned soberly. "I've been around a mite, and I know."

"I should say you have," Pedro agreed. "Reckon there's not much of any place you haven't been, Uncle Jake, or much of anything you haven't done. Let's see, you've been a soldier, a sailor, a miner, a cowhand, and one of Al Sieber's scouts."

"And now I'm a storekeeper," Jacob Green chuckled. "Reckon I'm getting old, Pedro."

"I only wish I could walk, and ride, as you can," the young Mexican replied, glancing at the crutch leaning against the counter.

"I still think you should let me advance you the money to go East and have that leg taken care of," Jacob Green said gently. "They could make you good as new, Pedro."

But the Mexican smilingly shook his head. "I will get the money together, in time," he replied.

"Will take a long time to do it, keeping store," Jacob Green objected.

"Perhaps," Pedro admitted, "but I have one or two other things in mind that may work out to shorten the time."

Jacob Green let the subject drop. It wasn't the first time he had offered to defray the expenses for the needed operation. But Pedro was proud. In his veins ran the blood of the Conquistadores, and with it the pride of Old Spain. He refused to accept help so long as there was a possibility of his helping himself.

Jacob Green did not persist in his offer, for he knew that such independence and self-reliance were of greater worth to a man than two good legs.

They finished their wine and got down to business.

"We'll go over these invoices and see if they take care of everything," Jacob Green said. "But first I want to put up my horse."

"Miguel," Pedro called, "take care of Uncle Jake's *caballo*."

The Indian boy glided out of the store. Jacob Green instantly got to his feet and followed, to keep a watchful eye on proceedings. The big bay did not like to have strangers touch him.

However, there was no need for his precaution. The small dark hand reached up and seized the bit iron without fear or hesitation. The bay, after a questioning glance at his master, followed sedately.

"He has a way with horses," Pedro observed when Green returned to his chair. "I still keep my pinto, you know, although I can't fork him. Miguel looks after him. Miguel is loyal and utterly reliable. I did myself a favor when I took him in."

" 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me,' " Jacob Green softly quoted. "The Founder of your Faith said that, Pedro, and He made no mistake."

"It is the teaching of the God we both worship," Pedro agreed soberly.

OUTSIDE the golden sunlight turned to a coppery red. The blue shadow of the hills flowed across the straggling town and purpled the prairie grasses. Night crouched catlike behind the crags, waiting. The hum of the town developed a more strident note.

"Well, reckon that finishes everything," Jacob Green remarked, shoving the sheaf of papers aside. "Think I'll amble down to the Imperial for a snort and a small surroundin'. I'll be seeing you later, Pedro. So long, Miguel."

"You will sleep here tonight?" Pedro questioned. "I have had another bunk built since you were here. There is room for all of us."

" 'Low I will," Green replied. "I may sit in for a few hands of poker if I find some of the cowmen playing. Feel the need of a mite of relaxation."

Pedro glanced at the double cartridge belts encircling Jacob Green's lean waist, and at the black butts of the two heavy guns sagging low in their carefully oiled and worked cut-out holsters.

"Didn't have any trouble on the way over?" he asked. "I'm always worried about you when you take that ride. It's a rough country between here and Maley."

" 'Pears to be getting plumb peaceful," Jacob Green smiled. "Reckon this pueblo is salty as ever, though."

"It certainly is," grunted Pedro. "About all the law there is here and to the west is what a man packs on his hip."

Jacob Green found the Imperial well crowded when he pushed through the swinging doors. It was evidently payday for the surrounding spreads and for the mines to the southwest. Bronzed cowboys and bearded miners lined the bar. The dance floor was doing plenty of business and the games were also busy.

At the far end of the bar stood Clate Martin, the owner of the place. Martin was a tall, broad-shouldered and well set-up man with calculating eyes and a hard mouth.

Jacob Green didn't particularly care for Clate Martin. He cared less for Martin's sidekick and constant companion, Jess Knolles.

Knolles was a waspish little rat of a man with fast hands and no nerves. If there was anything he was afraid of, nobody had ever learned what it was. He had pale gray eyes, crooked yellow teeth and no morals. He was Clate Martin's bodyguard, Green shrewdly suspected, and the chief reason why nobody had yet killed Martin.

But the Imperial sold better than average whisky and the food was excellent.

Jacob Green had a drink and then repaired to the lunch counter, where he surrounded a hefty helping of prime chuck. After eating, he looked the big room over, found a poker game where the players were old cowmen with whom he was slightly acquainted. He occupied a vacant chair and soon became absorbed in the cards.

Meanwhile, out of the red glare of the sunset had plodded a gray old burro and a gray old man. The burro's eyes were sad with the hypocritical sadness of all burros. The man's were kindly, and there was a softing of dreams in their blue depths.

Up to Pedro Castro's store ambled the well matched pair. The burro drooped disconsolate ears and waited. The man entered the store.

"*Buenos dias,* Hank!" Pedro greeted the old man. "How you feeling today?"

"Sort of so-so," replied the old desert rat. "Could stand a little snort of the special brand you keep under the counter."

PEDRO smilingly produced the bottle of wine and poured a glass to the brim. Hank downed it thirstily and poured himself another. He glanced at a cowboy who was making some purchases and sipped the second glass in silence. He did not speak until the cowboy left the store. Then he beckoned Pedro to come closer.

"Have any luck this time?" asked the Mexican.

Old Hank glanced at Miguel, who was pottering around behind the counter.

"He's okay," said Pedro, interpreting the questioning glance. "He's my partner and what I know he knows."

"Nice lookin' Injun kid, all right," Hank conceded. He fumbled a plump buckskin poke from under his shirt, glanced around again to make sure nobody was in the immediate vicinity, and dumped the contents on the counter.

"*Sangre de Dios!*" breathed Pedro, staring at the heap of nuggets and dust glowing dully in the lamplight.

"I got her this time!" exulted Hank. "She's rich, son, she's rich!"

"Where did you strike it, Hank?" Pedro asked as the oldster scooped the gold back into the sack.

"Horse Crik canyon, just west of the Devil's Hogback," replied Hank. "The hogback runs most into the canyon, yuh know. Claim is right inside the canyon, on the left bank of the crik. I posted notices in your name and mine. Tomorrow I'll file 'em. I told you you'd never regret grubstakin' old Hank Brocas when nobody else would give him even a handout. Pardner, we're rich!"

"It certainly looks that way," Pedro admitted. "It's a pity you can't file tonight."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Hank replied airily. "Too late, but I'll do it first thing in the mornin'. Nothin' to worry about. Nobody ever figgered there was any metal in that canyon. Surface indications don't show it, to the average eye, but I been wonderin' about that canyon for quite a spell.

"You know Horse Crik goes on a tear nearly every Spring, and has always been doin' it, I reckon. Every flood brings down a lot of stuff that in the course of the years covered the real canyon surface mighty deep with a lot of rubbish. Well, I just dropped a shaft through that overlay. Underneath it I hit the real canyon bed—gold bearin' gravel.

"Our claims are down to the mouth of the canyon, which of course is the richest deposit. Wouldn't be surprised, though, if there's quite a bit farther up. Enough to pay for workin' it. But we got the cream, pardner."

He stood up, stretching his sinewy old arms till they cracked.

"Feel real spry again," he chuckled. "I'm goin' to amble up town for a spell."

Pedro's black brows drew together. "You want to be careful," he cautioned. "Don't drink too much, and start talking. There are plenty of hombres in this town who would kill you for what's in that poke. And if somebody gets wind of the strike, there'll be a stampede pronto. And by the time you get back to the canyon you'll find your claim has been jumped. Be careful, Hank."

"Don't you worry, son," Hank assured him. "I ain't the gabbin' kind. I'm just goin' to have me a little drink or two and then hit the hay. I'll file first thing in the mornin' and then hightail back to the canyon to do my assessment work. If anybody comes up there lookin' for trouble, I'll feed it to 'em till it runs out of their ears."

He tapped the butt of his long-barrelled old Smith & Wesson .44 significantly. "Don't fret, son," he added, and left the store.

BUT Pedro did fret. Sober, Hank could take care of himself, plenty. But Pedro knew the habits of prospectors. After weeks of loneliness in the hills, they hankered for sociability and conversation. With too many snorts under his belt, Hank might become loquacious, and it would take but a hint to start somebody thinking.

Folks had often laughed at Hank pottering about in Horse Creek Canyon, and had 'lowed that Pedro was plumb loco to grubstake the old coot. Pedro had not taken Hank's efforts too seriously himself, but he liked the old fellow and felt he could afford to provide for his simple camp wants and make him happy. And now it looked like his goodheartedness had paid off.

"Bread cast upon the waters, the Senor Green would say," he smiled to Miguel. "Listen to what Uncle Jake has to say, and you can't go wrong. But just the same I sure wish there was somebody up there to keep an eye on that claim till it's properly filed and registered. A claim that isn't filed and registered is wide open."

Miguel spoke for the first time. "You get gold, get leg fixed, ride again?"

"Reckon so," Pedro replied. "Sure wish I could ride now. I'd sure hightail for that canyon."

Miguel said nothing more, but his black eyes fixed on the heavy rifle standing in a corner. A little later, while Pedro was busy with his accounts, he slid past the corner and out the door, walking as only an Indian can.

Pedro did not hear him, but his shadow fell across the counter and Pedro looked up.

"Where you going, *muchacho?*" he asked.

"Take walk," replied Miguel, sticking his head around the door jamb but keeping his body out of sight.

"Don't go too far," cautioned Pedro, and went back to his figures. A few minutes later, however, he raised his head. From the direction of the stable sounded a thudding of hoofs, drawing away.

Pedro glanced about wonderingly. Suddenly he missed the rifle from its corner, and understood.

"Darn *loco Indio!*" he swore in affectionate exasperation. "He's heading for the canyon to guard those claims. He'll get lost, if he ever gets that far, which the chances are he won't. The *caballo* has a sore foot."

A moment later, however, he chuckled. He knew there was small chance of Miguel coming to harm, and a night in the open would be nothing new to the Yaqui boy.

Jacob Green was playing poker when Hank Brocas entered the saloon. He did not know Hank but noticed his entrance and thought he was an interesting character. Immediately afterward, in the excitement of a good hand and a big pot, he forgot all about him.

Hank had himself a couple of drinks, moseyed over to the lunch counter and put away a vast surrounding of chuck. Then he returned to the bar and got down to the serious business of drinking. He paid for his snorts with small silver coins he dug from his pocket. Finally he fumbled in the pocket and brought nothing forth. He swore under his breath, looked longingly at the bottle. For several moments he hesitated, but the whisky was beginning to buzz in his ears and cloud his judgment. He furtively thrust his hand inside his shirt, groped around a bit and brought forth a small nugget which he laid on the bar.

"This had ought to be good for a couple more," he grunted.

The barkeep hefted the nugget, a gleam in his muddy little eyes.

"Had ought to be good for a couple dozen more, from the weight of it," he said. "Where'd you get it, old timer?"

"Oh, picked it up wanderin' around," Hank replied carelessly. "Got a couple more. Was just a pocket with a handful of stuff in it. The sort you run onto ever now and then."

The bartender nodded, but the gleam did not leave his eyes. He knew something about mining and realized this was no pocket gold.

"I'll weigh her up," he said, and walked to the end of the bar, where the scales were. He dropped the nugget in the pan, his back to Hank. As he adjusted the balance, he was whispering excitedly to Clate Martin, the proprietor.

HANK had had his second drink from the proceeds of the nugget when he felt a touch on his elbow. He turned to face Clate Martin. A little behind Martin lounged Jess Knolles, as usual.

"Howdy, Hank!" Martin greeted. "Haven't seen you for quite a spell. Have one on the house. Give us a double, Charley."

The barkeep poured. Hank downed the stiff snort without blinking, and mumbled a word of thanks. Martin exclaimed with admiration.

"You sure can put it away," he said. "A feller what can down redeye like that should drink the best. Charley, hand out a bottle of my private stock from under the bar."

The barkeep obeyed, setting a squat black bottle at Hank's elbow.

"Try that," Martin urged.

Hank downed another drink, smacked his lips. "Prime!" he exclaimed.

"You sure know your whisky," Martin applauded.

Old Hank nodded owlishly. "Two things I know," he mouthed thickly. "Whisky and gold! Can't fool me on either one, no shir!"

"I know whisky," Martin said. "But I don't know anything much about gold, 'cept when it's in twenty-pieces. Never had no experience at minin'. Must be fine to hit on gold. Reckon you've picked up plenty in your time."

"Sho-sho," Hank admitted.

"Pity you ain't had any luck of late," remarked Martin, turning as if to leave.

Old Hank bristled with offended alcoholic pride. "Who says I ain't had any luck?" he demanded. "I had plenty. Gonna file rich strike tomorrow."

"Now ain't that fine!" exclaimed Martin. "Sure you ain't makin' no mistake? Or are you just stringin' me?"

"Mistake, nothin'!" mumbled Hank, fumbling inside his shirt. "See this paper? It's copy of location notices. Don't call that a mistake, do you?"

Martin took the smeary sheet and examined it carefully, his eyes glowing.

"Looks good," he admitted, "but you shouldn't be packin' it around when you're drinkin'. Suppose you let me put it in the safe for you till tomorrow. Be safe there."

Hank, however, was not altogether sodden with drink. Some corner of his fuzzy brain remained active and set up a clamor of warning. He shook his head. "I'll keep it," he said, reaching out a gnarled old hand.

Martin moved back a step, deftly pocketing the paper. "It's safer with me," he said. "I'll keep it till morning."

Hank was abruptly much soberer, and genuinely alarmed. "You give me it now," he demanded.

Martin moved back a couple of steps farther, shooting a meaningful glance at Jess Knolles, who instantly slipped between him and the old man.

"Go on," Knolles rasped truculently. "The boss knows what's best. He'll do the right thing by you."

Hank lunged forward. "Robbers!" he bawled, and went for his gun.

Jess Knolles waited till the old Smith and Wesson cleared leather. Then he drew, and shot Hank twice, once through the body and the second time squarely between the eyes. The old man went down without a groan.

"You saw it, Boss? You saw it, Charley?" Knolles shouted. "I had to do it in self defense. He drew on me. He'd have drilled me in another minute."

"You couldn't do anything else," the bartender yelled above the uproar of excited voices and overturning chairs. "All that hooch he downed must have made him plumb loco. You hadn't done anything to him."

Men were crowding around, shouting and gesticulating. Jacob Green knelt beside the prospector's body. "Poor old feller," he muttered. "He never had a chance."

Clate Martin glared down at him. "You keep out of this, Green," he spat. "It ain't no skin off your nose."

Jacob Green glanced up at him in mild surprise.

"What you on the prod for, Clate?" he asked. "Nobody's accusing you of anything."

He reached forward to feel for the possible heartbeat he felt sure was not there. His hand encountered a bulky object.

But Martin slapped his hand aside. "Don't you be tryin' to clean his pockets!" he snapped. "We don't stand for that sort of thing in here."

JACOB GREEN came to his feet like an uncoiled spring. His right hand lashed out, backed by the whole of his hundred and fifty pounds of hard muscle. Martin, big as he was, sat down, and sat down hard.

Jess Knolles squalled a curse, and streaked for his holster. Men yelled and ducked as the room again rocked to the crash of a shot. Jess Knolles howled like a Comanche and hopped like a galvanized frog, wringing his tingling and blood-dripping fingers. His gun, the lock smashed, the stock splintered, lay halfway across the room.

"Don't reach for the other one, Jess," Jacob Green cautioned. "Next time I might not miss, and drill you dead center."

"He might not miss!" chuckled a near-by cowman, despite the tenseness of the moment. "Uncle Jake can dot the eye of a lizard at thirty paces with that old hogleg. The only reason Jess Knolles is alive is because Uncle Jake figgers hell is overcrowded right now."

Clate Martin was on his feet, a hand against his swelling jaw. He jerked the raving Knolles back with his other hand.

"You get out of here, Green!" he bawled. "I don't ever want to see you in here again."

"Better buy yourself some blinders, then," Jacob Green replied. There was no twinkle in his brown eyes, now. They were hard as bits of obsidian.

"I don't know what this is all about," he remarked. "But I know one thing. What just happened was nothing but a cold-blooded killing. If you two fanging sidewinders don't like the sound of that, well, nobody's sitting on your shirt tails."

He waited a moment, alert and ready. But neither Knolles nor Martin seemed inclined to take up the challenge. They drew back, muttering and glaring.

Jacob Green holstered his gun, deliberately turned his back on the glowering pair, and walked from the saloon.

"I'll foller him!" stormed Knolles. "I'll do for him!"

"Shut up!" snapped Martin. "You leave him alone. If you make a play for him, he'll kill you. He was one of Sieber's scouts, and you know what that means. Come on, we got things to do."

He snapped an order to a couple of swampers to place the body in the kitchen and guard it. Then he led Knolles to the back room, locking the door behind him.

"We're ridin', right now," he announced. "We're headin' for that canyon—not a minute to waste. Pedro Castro's name is on them notices and Brocas must have told him about the strike. And the old fool might have blabbed to someone else. I don't think so, though. He was sober when he came in here. But we're not takin' any chances."

"What about Castro?" Knolles asked. "He'll yell his head off when he finds out what happened."

"Let him yell," growled Martin. "Who cares about a Mexican cripple? Besides, when we get back, we'll tell folks there's more gold farther up the canyon, and more claims to be staked. There'll be a stampede pronto, and in the excitement, nobody will pay any attention to what he says. Let's go!"

Jacob Green, walking slowly along the street and pondering the recent happenings, heard the beat of fast hoofs fading into the west. But as cowhands were constantly coming and going in and out of town, he thought nothing of it.

"There's sure something funny about that killing," he mused. "I can't understand it. If it had been just an average barroom row, Martin would have slapped the old feller over and let it go at that. Looks like they sure didn't want him to talk about something. Had they robbed him of his poke, I wonder? Doesn't seem reasonable. Martin isn't exactly poverty stricken and he'd hardly take such a chance for a few dollars worth of dust. Think I'll go tell Pedro about it. Perhaps he can figure it out."

Pedro "figured it out" in a hurry. He swore in two languages and explained the mystery.

"I'm worried about Miguel," he concluded. "The chances are they'll catch him up before he gets to the canyon. The pinto has a bad foot and is apt to go lame any minute. The gold is good as gone, of course. An unfiled claim is open to relocation, and I can't prove that Hank located first. I wouldn't care, though, if I could be sure Miguel is all right."

UNCLE JAKE GREEN stood up, hitching his cartridge belts a trifle higher.

"I know this country," he said. "I was down here several times when I was with Sieber. There's a trail into the canyon that cuts off miles of distance. We used it once to corral a bunch of raiding Apaches who were trying to make a getaway through the canyon. It isn't the sort of trail anybody rides from choice, especially at night, but I'll take a chance on it."

He was out the door before the crippled Mexican could voice a protest.

As Jacob Green rode the winding trail that led to Horse Creek Canyon he made his plans. He figured that Martin and Knolles were not particularly familiar with the country, which doubtless would slow them. Perhaps the Indian boy would reach the canyon first and hole up. If he did so, Martin and Knolles might get a hot reception. But if they overtook him on the trail, it would be another story.

Green did not care to risk following the unsavory pair by way of the Canyon Trail. They had a head start, were well mounted and might know the country better than he thought. Also, in the silent night, they would be sure to hear him approach and would take precautions. He suffered no illusions as to the nature of what he was taking on. Martin and Knolles were snake-blooded killers.

The night was a trifle hazy, with a slice of moon casting a misty, uncertain light over the rugged hill country. Jacob Green peered ahead, alert and watchful, as the miles flowed beneath the speeding irons of his tall bay. At no great distance was the spot where he would leave the trail and take a chance on shaking hands with the angels.

He rounded a bend and uttered a sharp exclamation. Directly ahead, a small figure was stumbling along the trail. Jacob Green came up to it with a rush of flying hoofs slithering to a halt.

There was blood on the Indian boy's face that flowed from a cut in his scalp just above the left temple, but his black eyes were bright and hard.

"You all right, Miguel?" Green called anxiously.

"Not hurt," replied the Yaqui. "Men catch. Hit over head. Take horse. Take gun. Ride ahead. I follow."

"Up behind me," said Green, reaching down a hand. "And hang on tight. We're going places!"

They did, at a speed that all but took the boy's breath away. Very shortly they swerved to the right. "Wrong way!" exclaimed Miguel.

"Nope," Jacob Green returned. "Short cut to the canyon."

Miguel nodded, but a few minutes later he peered around Green's shoulder and spoke again.

"Ride that, you need wings," he declared with conviction.

"They'd come in handy," Jacob Green chuckled. "But maybe we can get along without them. Rojo is mighty sure footed."

Before them stretched the lofty crest of the Devil's Hogback—a narrow, crumbling track less than three feet in width. On either side of the track, almost perpendicular slopes of shattered, boulder strewn shale stretched downward for half a dozen yards.

From the far edge of the slope, the drop was sheer—hundreds of feet to the rock fangs at the bottom of the gorge across which the hogback ran. The dizzy ridge was more than a mile in length. Two-thirds of the way across was a hair raising stretch of a hundred yards or more where the footing was not twenty inches in width.

The Canyon Trail, which veered to the south, circled around the far end of the gorge, curved north once more and paralleled the hogback for the last few hundred yards before it petered out after it crossed the gulf.

With a snort of protest, the red-bay stepped onto the narrow track. Daintily, as if stepping over eggs, he picked his way along up the gently ascending ledge to where it levelled off to cross the gulf. He set his hoofs down precisely, avoided loose boulders, stepped with the greatest care, feeling his way. Jacob Green encouraged him with voice and hand. The Indian boy stared stolidly ahead.

They reached the frightful spine of the hogback. Rojo snorted again, and eased forward onto the mere thread of uneven stone. Slow step by slow step, he forged ahead, shivering and blowing. Two-thirds of the distance was covered without mishap.

Whoe-e-ee!

SOMETHING yelled through the air directly over their heads. Jacob Green's eyes jerked to the front. Standing on the hogback beyond where it left the gulf were Clate Martin and Jess Knolles.

"The sidewinders made better time than I thought they would," Jacob Green muttered. "They spotted us from the trail. Steady, Rojo, we've got to get across this knife-edge before we can do a thing."

His voice quieted the shivering horse and it stepped out with greater confidence. Jacob Green held his breath as the slugs whined past. Martin and Knolles were running forward, shooting as they came.

With a whistling breath of relief, Rojo reached the slightly broader track beyond the spine. Jacob Green instantly jerked his right-hand gun, leaned to one side and sent six bullets hissing toward Martin and Knolles. They ducked and yelped as the lead fanned their faces, and ran back a few steps.

But shooting by the dim and misty moonlight was nothing but guess work. They were untouched. A moment more and they came running forward again, guns blazing. Jacob Green grimly waited until they should close the distance somewhat.

Suddenly the bay screamed as only a pain-struck horse can scream. He reared high, both front feet off the ground. A bullet had scored a shallow furrow along his glossy haunch.

Miguel's arms were torn from their grip around Green's waist. With a single frightened yelp, he fell, struck the slope and went sliding down feet first. From the tail of his eye, Jacob Green saw him come to a halt at the very lip of the awful gulf beyond the slope.

It took seconds of terrific effort to get the frenzied horse under control. Jacob Green glanced down the slope. His horror filled eyes saw Miguel spread-eagled, rigid, his feet resting against a slight ledge of shale that had stopped his downward progress a scant second before he would have taken the frightful plunge into the depths. And the ledge was slowly crumbling away beneath his weight.

"Don't move!" Jacob Green shouted. "If you move, you're a goner."

With frantic speed he uncoiled his rope, tied hard and fast to the horn and sent the slender line dangling down the slope toward where Miguel lay on the brink of eternity, not daring to move a finger.

Jacob Green now swung out of the saddle, gripping the rope. "Stand, horse, if you ever did!" he implored, and went down the rope hand over hand.

Boulders loosened by his progress went rolling and bounding down the slope to vanish into the depths. One struck the tiny ledge that supported Miguel. The ledge disintegrated in a puff of dust and flying fragments. Miguel started sliding again.

Jacob Green flung out a despairing hand and gripped his collar just before he vanished over the lip. With a mighty effort he hauled Miguel up to him.

"Get your arms around my neck and hang on!" he gasped.

Miguel instantly obeyed and Green started the awful climb back up the slope. He could hear Rojo blowing and snorting, and his slipping irons scraping the rock. Bullets were whining all about them, fanning their faces, kicking up spurts of dust beside them.

"If they only don't think to shoot the horse!" Jacob Green prayed.

However, this expedient apparently did not occur to either Knolles or Martin, in the excitement. But the slugs were coming closer, the reports loudening. The killers were speeding along the ridge.

Foot by agonized foot, Jacob Green toiled up the slope. His arms were a fiery ache, his breath came in gulping sobs. He glanced upward and discovered a new terror. The rope, rasping back and forth against the sharp edge of the ledge was fraying. Already a strand had been severed and curled up like the lip of a snarling dog.

A last frantic effort, with Rojo's irons slipping and sliding and they were sprawled upon the rocky surface of the ledge. Jacob Green staggered to his feet. Martin and Knolles were not fifty feet away.

Green jerked his gun and fired as fast as he could pull trigger. Knolles pitched forward to lie writhing and cursing, blood pouring down his face from a scalp wound. With a yell of rage, Martin hurled his empty gun at Jacob Green and rushed.

Lining sights with his breast, Green pulled trigger. The hammer clicked hollowly on an empty shell, and then Martin was on top of him. The gun was dashed from his hand, Martin's arms went around him in a bear grip.

FORWARD and backward they swayed on the dizzy crest, heaving, wrestling, straining with every muscle. Martin was soft and not in good condition, but he outweighed the older man by seventy pounds. His huge bulk crushed Green down, and he took no heed of the short blows smashing his face and body.

As they whirled about, locked in a mad embrace, Jacob Green saw Jess

Knolles stagger to his feet and steal forward, a gleaming knife in his hand. But just as he braced himself to feel the cold blade between his shoulders, there was a crunch of metal on bone and Knolles spun off the ledge and went rolling and bounding down the slope to vanish into the gulf.

Miguel had picked up Jacob Green's fallen gun and slammed Knolles over the head with all the strength of his vigorous young arm! With the strength of despair, Jacob Green tore free from Martin's crushing grip and staggered back. Martin gave a furious yell and rushed at him, eyes glaring, hair bristling.

As he came, Jacob Green ducked under the reaching hands, seized Martin around the thighs and heaved with all his remaining strength.

Martin shot over his head as if he had taken unto himself wings. He hit the slope half way down, rolled, slid and with an awful scream of terror and despair, plunged downward to the fangs of stone hundreds of feet below.

Gasping and panting, Jacob Green staggered to where Rojo stood and leaned against his shoulder for support. He got his breath back somewhat and gazed at Miguel, who was regarding him with serious black eyes.

"Gone to blazes—both," observed the Yaqui boy.

Jacob Green smiled at him, and drew in great lungfuls of life giving air.

"Let's see, Miguel," he said at length, "just what did we come up here for?"

"To stake claim," said Miguel.

"Well," chuckled Jacob Green, "seeing as everything is orderly and peaceful once more, suppose we go ahead and do it."

Value of the Joker

A True Western Gambling Incident

By TEX GAINSVILLE

THE American playing card deck contained no joker until about 1830. But it wasn't until sometime after the Civil war that the joker's use was popularized by Western gamblers, who even invented games that were built around the joker.

At Hyram's Corner, Wyoming, in 1873, Jack Harvest maintained that a player could elect any value he needed for the joker in his hand—accordingly, he held a full house. Sam Curnak said that where he came from, in Nebraska, a joker might be elected to any value up to jack, but no higher, and therefore Harvest merely held two pair.

Names, other than those by which the two men had been christened, were exchanged. Harvest's hand slid toward his back pocket and came out with a seven-inch bladed knife. Curnak stepped back rapidly and kicked up the table, knocking Harvest's knife out of his hand onto the floor.

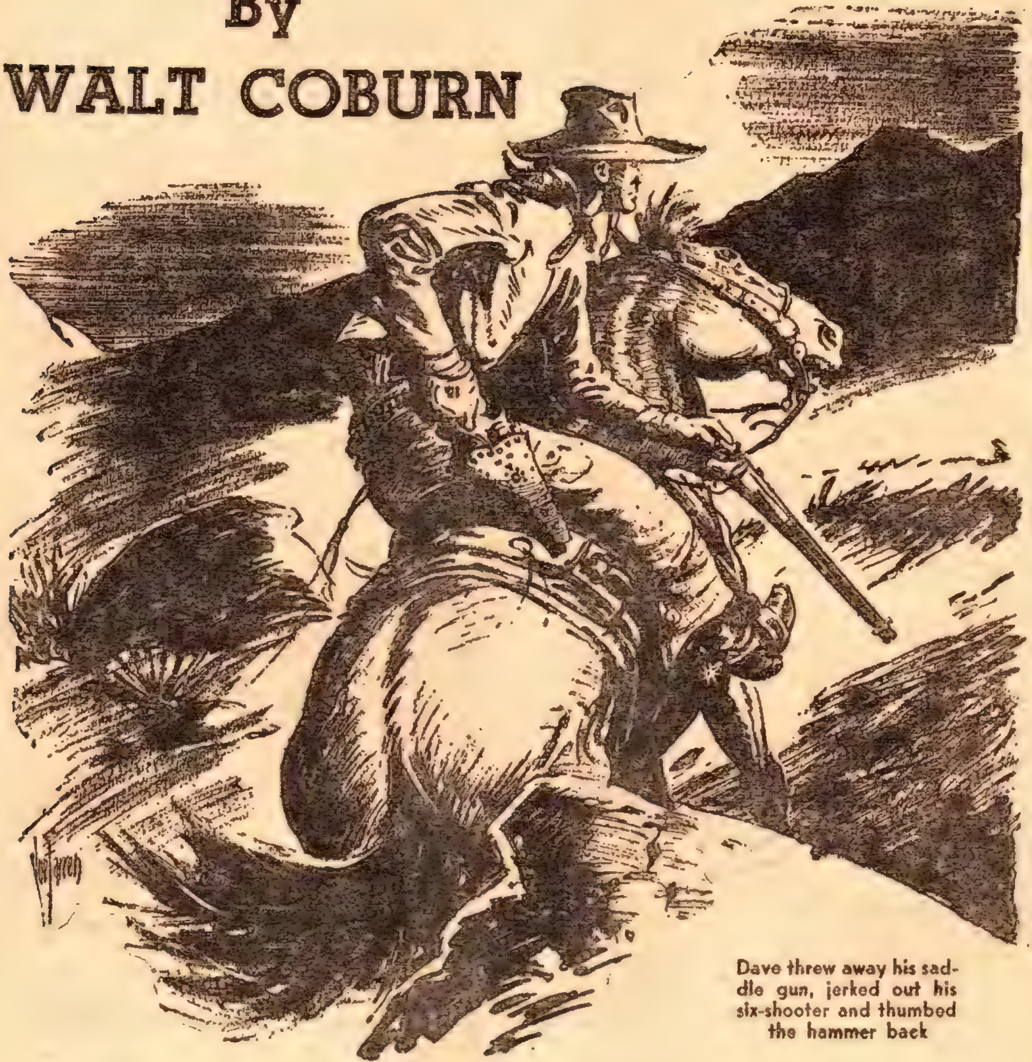
Both men dived for the weapon. Harvest was nearer but Curnak gripped his knife hand and held it fast. Harvest kicked out and Curnak rolled to one side. The knife flew across the intervening space and found a target in Curnak's stomach.

Slowly the injured man rose to his feet. He drew the knife out of his belly and placed his left palm firmly over the wound to hold the blood in. His eyes bored into those of the other man and he moved in closer to the knife thrower. Harvest backed away. Curnak took three more steps, stopped, and fell unconscious.

And from then on, a joker held any elected value up to ace!

LAST of the LONG S

By
WALT COBURN



Dave threw away his saddle gun, jerked out his six-shooter and thumbed the hammer back

I

THE Arizona cow-country was slowly dying of thirst. Old timers claimed it was the longest drouth in history and nobody denied it. The green grass shriveled, dried up and died, and the sun baked the earth to a thick crust. Cattle, traveling a long way to the water holes that became fewer and farther between, wore the trail deep. Their cloven hoofs shuffled up dust and the continuous wind blew it across the desert wasteland to gather in a haze at the foot of the mountains.

The sun was a brassy ball in a faded blue cloudless sky. Bleached bones of cattle and wild burros and stray horses marked the dried up water holes.

Small rivers and creeks dried up and

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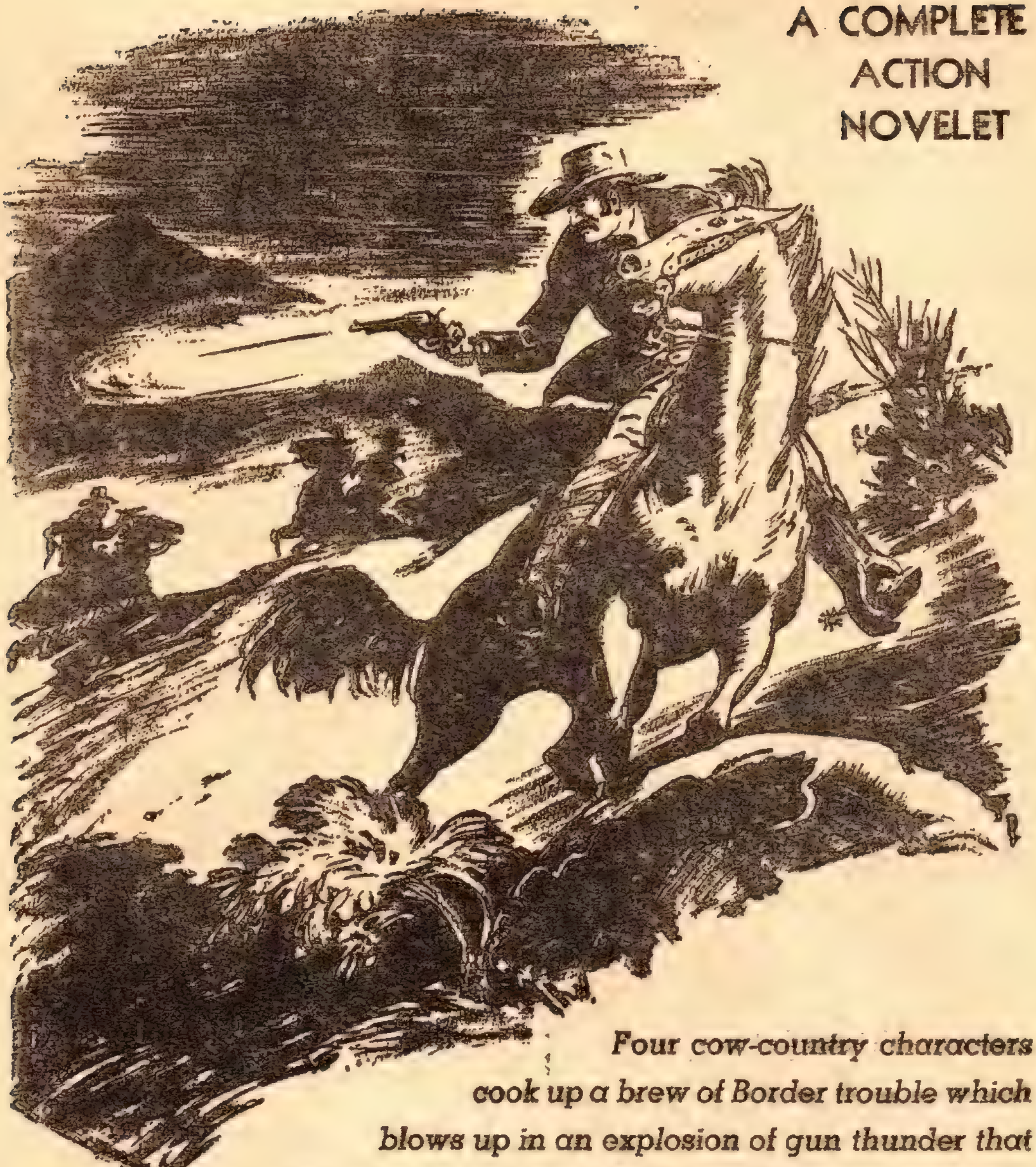


Four cow-country characters cook up a brew of Border trouble which blows up in an explosion of gun thunder that almost carries them to Kingdom Come on its echoes!

became sand washes. Thinking the water had gone underground, men dug deep holes in the dry beds and when they found no water, left their shovels sticking in the sand, grim monuments of defeat. Springs that had never before gone dry became dust bowls.

Dave Ryan, cowman, dug for water at Big Springs. Sweat soaked his faded blue cotton shirt, and when he leaned on his shovel to rest, the wind dried the sweat and left a white salt crust. His weathered face was dust powdered, streaked with sweat that had carried the dirt into the week's stubble of wiry black whiskers that marred the clean line of his jaw. New lines that were etched around the corners of his gray blue eyes and his mouth, made him look ten years older than his thirty years. His eyes were bloodshot and red lidded and his lips were sun cracked.

Three cows that had lost their calves because they were starving and had no milk in their udders, stood in the heavy sand, watching Dave Ryan dig. They were wild longhorned mountain cattle that had never let a horse rider get within range. But they stood close now, their hides stretched over their bones and the Long S brand standing out, as if they had declared a sort of truce because they sensed that the man with the shovel was digging for water.

Only when Dave was winded, did he straighten up, leaning a little backwards to get the kink out of his spine. His grimed hands were cramped around the shovel handle. He tilted his hat back and sweat ran from his untrimmed shock of wiry black matted hair. Pity for the cattle that were dying of thirst, filled him. Then his nerves, taut as fiddle strings, snapped. Leaning on his shovel, he cursed in a croaking, dry-throated whisper, opening the deep cracks in his blackened lips until the blood came. Their eyes staring at the man who cursed them, the dying cattle never moved from their tracks.

When the sound of his own voice came back to him, like some puny ineffectual noise beating against his eardrums, Ryan clamped his teeth down and bit his almost hysterical tirade off in the middle of a word. His cramped fingers loosened their grip on the shovel handle and he crawled out of the shallow hole he had dug. He walked over to where his thorn-scarred leather chaps lay on the ground and took a .45 six-shooter from one chaps pocket. When he straightened up with his gun in his hand, he looked at the three dry cows pityingly. He had the gun tilted back in his hand, his thumb on the hammer.

At the edge of the hole and just beyond the cows stood a big, gaunt, dun-colored renegade stag with a six-foot horn spread, the tip of one horn sawed off by the only cowhand who had ever roped him. The stag had been a maverick bull until he was about a four year old. His dun hide wore a big Long S brand that had been put on with a running iron by Uncle Billy Scarborough, who had owned the Long S cow outfit until Dave Ryan, who had drifted down into Arizona from Wyoming, had picked up the bank mortgage and moved in. Uncle Billy said he went with the outfit, for boot, if Dave could put up with an old cut back, and Dave claimed him along with the outfit. It was Uncle Billy who had named the renegade stag Big Yaller.

Uncle Billy had pointed the big stag out one morning right after Dave Ryan had bought the outfit, where he was bushed up on the far slope of the canyon.

"Big Yaller is a kinda landmark, Dave. Like me," he had said. "We're two of a kind that's outgrowed our usefulness. But me'n Big Yaller will hang and rattle fer a while.

"Whenever you sight that danged Big Yaller, match the old ox a race, for the fun of it. That's what he's a-hankerin' fer. He shore admires to kick gravel in a cowpony's face when he fades on down the steep slant. Now that he's been stagged, that's all he's got to live fer. Don't never disappoint that danged old left-over."

DAVE RYAN remembered Uncle Billy's words now, and lowered his gun. In all his three years, working as a wild brush popper cowhand, and he'd matched the stag a few races during that time, this was as close to ketching Big Yaller as he'd ever got.

A hard lump formed in the young cowman's throat. Those three dry-cows and Big Yaller were about all there was remaining of a sizeable bunch of cattle in the Long S iron. Dave stood there, legs spread, for quite a while, then blinked the sweat from his eyes and lifted the gun. He shot the three cows, each bullet going in behind an ear. The rough hills threw back the hollow echoes, and before the last one died away, Big Yaller had vanished from sight.

A faint grin of relief spread Dave Ryan's mouth. His lips cracked open again and there was the taste of blood in his mouth.

He put the gun back in the pocket of his chaps and buckled them on. He tightened his saddle cinch, mounted and headed back for the home ranch, leaving his shovel stuck in the dry sand that had once been Big Springs.

The sun was going down, a molten brass ball dropping below the ragged skyline when he rode down off the hogback ridge toward the adobe buildings and mesquite corrals below. The dry wash had been a flowing creek three years before when Dave had first sighted it.

The slopes and the valley below had been carpeted green, and where the foothills flattened out into the desert, the flat country had been green where the catclaw and mesquite were in leaf and the cacti were blooming with vivid red and orange and purple and lemon-yellow blossoms. It had been what Uncle Billy had called 'a filaree spring.' The weed called 'filaree' was the finest cattle feed in the world. It grew in creeping trailers with small green leaves and tiny pinkish blooms.

Now the whole country was bare and parched, and had a dried-up forever look. Far out across the desert a dust devil spiraled high and far up into the pale sky, for all the world like a ghostly wraith leaving the drouthed out earth and carrying the spirit of a dead cow-country upward and far beyond into the relentless heavens.

The dismal creak of the old windmill greeted Dave Ryan as he rode up to the ranchhouse. Uncle Billy was squatted on his bootheels, his back against the adobe cabin. Short, sort of weathered and shriveled up, his battered old hat slanted across his puckered sky-blue eyes. His jaw was shaved clean and a white mustache drooped down across the corners of his mouth. His shirt was patched at both elbows and his rusty old boots had been half-soled twice. His squinted eyes were watching the creaking windmill.

"She's shore scrapin' bottom, Dave." He spoke in a lazy soft-toned voice.

"Yeah."

Dave swung down and unsaddled and turned his horse loose. He shoved out three empty shells from his gun, the brass cartridges making a faint tinkling sound as they struck the ground. He took three cartridges from the pocket of his old Levis and reloaded the gun and shoved it into the waistband of his overalls.

"We're plumb outa the cow business, Uncle Billy." A crooked grin twisted Dave's mouth.

"Then we don't have to worry no more. Just set back an' whittle on a stick."

Uncle Billy had been whittling. The pile of long shavings around his feet showed how long he'd been sitting there on his hunkers. He tossed what was left of the stick aside and closed the big blade on his jackknife, brushing the whittlings off him as he got to his bowed legs. Dave's hands and face were dirty and his whole hide was dusty and sweaty, but he couldn't waste precious water taking a bath.

Uncle Billy had their supper of frijole beans and jerky ready. They carried their tin plates and tin cups of black coffee outside and sat down cross legged and ate in silence. Plates emptied, cups drained, they were laid aside. Uncle Billy handed his sack of tobacco and book of wheat straw papers to Dave. They rolled their cigarettes thin and smoked slowly. They had been running low on tobacco. Neither man made mention of it. There were a lot of things they took for granted, and they shared a sort of brooding silence. They sat there for a long time, until the long twilight thickened and the shadows of night crept into the mountains.

A dry twig snapped in the near-by brush and both men looked up in that direction. They watched Big Yaller as he horned his way out of the heavy brush and headed for the horse trough, cloven hoofs shuffling. He stopped at the trough and lifted his head and looked towards the two men sitting there without moving a muscle. Then Big Yaller shoved his head into the water and drank.

"First time," Uncle Billy Scarborough spoke softly, "I ever ketched you in a lie, Dave. While that Big Yaller outlaw wears the Long S iron, we're still in the cow business." Uncle Billy's faded blue eyes lighted up strangely in the dusk.

When Big Yaller had drunk his full, he headed for the little bunch of saddle horses and pack mules, grazing among them on what hay they left on the ground.

"Big Yaller's range is at the upper end of Rough Canyon. I never figgered he'd ever stray this far from his stompin' ground and throw in with a bunch of cow horses that he figgers is his mortal enemies. To say nothin' of us pair of humans."

Uncle Billy tilted his head toward the sky. "New moon up yonder, Dave. When you can't hang your powderhorn on a new moon that's tilted like that, without wettin' your powder, that's a wet moon. Looks like now's the time to make a wish."

II

THE moon was still in its first quarter when the rains came. The thunderheads had been building up to the south in Old Mexico. Sheet lightning flashed across the sky and after that came the low growl of distant thunder.

Uncle Billy and Dave spread their tarp covered roundup beds on the ground and lay awake watching the storm come up. The weather gave them something to talk about and they swapped tall tales about flash-floods and Wyoming blizzards.

It must have been somewhere around midnight when the first raindrops spattered on the canvas bed tarps, and when they looked up into the black starless sky they knew that this was it. The beginning of the rains that would put an end to the long drouth.

They got out of bed and stripped, and both men stood there in the night, jay-bird naked, while the thunder rolled up out of Old Mexico and the lightning cracked and the pitch black darkness was lit up with a blinding glare. They let the heavy rain wash the stale grime of dust and sweat from their hides and grinned at each other like two kids. In the little remuda beyond the barn, horses and mules rolled in the mud. When the drenching rain washed the mud off their backs they acted like spring colts.

"Lookit, Dave! There's that Big Yaller ox standin' in the rain, fer all the world like a backslid Christian gettin' his sins washed away!"

Big Yaller's wide black horns glistened in the lightning glare, and he lent his raucous bawl to the nickering and braying of the horses and mules.

"Like they was givin' thanks," said Dave Ryan.

The rain fell in heavy sheets that left puddles of water all around. It came down faster than the sandy soil could drink it in. Once the drouth was broken, it rained steadily for days, the kind of rain that was good for the country, giving the dry ground a chance to soak it in deep where it did some good.

The dry springs came back to life. The dry wash was once more a creek. Dave and Uncle Billy, there at the start, had dragged out tubs and buckets, dishpans and the big blackened coffee pot and set them out to fill. They pulled the canvas tarps off their beds and spread blankets and soogans out to get drenched.

"Looks like the whole dang outfit," grinned Uncle Billy, "is gittin' the stink off."

Dave went around barefooted with only a worn-out pair of Levis on, the legs rolled up almost to the knees. Nobody bothered to mend the leak in the cabin roof. And you could almost see the green grass grow. Dave went down in the well to measure the water and rode out to measure the springs and waterholes.

It took a few weeks for the range to green out. Meanwhile, both men tried to keep busy. The rains had broken the long drouth. They had come too late to do Dave Ryan and Uncle Billy and the Long S outfit any good, but that didn't keep them from feeling happy about the cow country.

One morning Big Yaller was gone. By that time the cow horses and pack mules had got used to the big stag grazing among them. Big Yaller was the only cow-brute left in the Long S iron.

The morning Big Yaller turned up missing, Dave Ryan waited for Uncle Billy to give him the opening he needed, to put into words what he had been milling over in his mind while he watched the green grass grow.

They were squatted on their hunkers at the big corral, whittling. Dave found a half-smoked sack of tobacco and the give-away papers that came with it in his pocket and rolled a cigarette. He handed the makings to Uncle Billy, and they lit their smokes off the same match.

DAVE was thinking back to the first morning he had spent at the Long S ranch and had tackled Uncle Billy for a job. Uncle Billy had told him that the bank had a mortgage on the outfit and was closing him out in a week or so. He'd lost the outfit in a poker game to John Deal who owned the Border Bank. Uncle Billy had got drunk on the Mexican side of the town of Los Gatos and had pokered away his outfit at the International Club, also owned by John Deal, just across the line. John Deal, banker on the U.S. side of the line and square-deal gambler, on the Mexican side of the Border, were one and the same man.

Dave had then told Uncle Billy how come he had drifted this far south from his home range up in Wyoming. Dave Ryan had been one of the nester ranchers in the broad middle of the cattle war that was then going on. The big outfits called all the nesters cattle rustlers and had put a bounty on their hides. Dave's father and two brothers had been killed by imported hired gunslingers. Dave had been lucky with only a couple of bullet rips that were healing when the night riders rode up on the home ranch where he was alone. They wore long saddle slickers covering their clothes and had handkerchiefs tied up across their faces.

They threw a ketch rope over the ridge log outside the cabin and held kangaroo court on him. They were all in favor of him stretching rope except one man. He was the only man wearin' a yellow saddle slicker, and when it came his turn to say how he was votin', he lifted the black silk handkerchief tied up across his face, and swallowed a drink from the bottle of rotgut he had in his hand. Dave had seen a week's crop of red whiskers when he tilted the bottle, and his eyes were as green as a beer bottle above the handkerchief.

When he drained what was left in the bottle, he banged it against the cook stove. He had the bottle neck in his left hand and the broken edges made a wicked weapon. He had a white bone handled six-shooter in the other hand. He told them to give Dave Ryan a saddle horse and a horse to pack his bed and let him quit the country. The gent in the yellow slicker had said he was sick of so much murdering. It was to be like he said or there'd be one hell of a ruckus, and his green eyes kept watching a big six-footer that had done most of the talking. He had made his whizzer stick and Dave had drifted south, headed for Mexico.

Dave Ryan had enough money in a checking account in a Wyoming bank to buy himself a small outfit, providing he had the nerve to stop running too far south and use the money. So, when he had stopped at the Long S ranch and Uncle Billy had told him about the mortgage, Dave Ryan had made his decision. He had quit running. Dave had ridden to town and filled out a counter check with the name of the Wyoming bank filled in with his own handwriting. It drained his bank account but it was enough to pick up the Long S mortgage.

Dave had handed the check to John Deal and Deal told him that Uncle Billy went with the outfit. John Deal and

Dave Ryan had shaken hands on the deal. Both men knew that Dave Ryan, by signing a check on a Wyoming bank, had turned over his hole card for the banker to look at.

Now as they sat smoking and whittling, Dave waited for Uncle Billy to break the silence.

"I know what's on your mind, Dave. You want to tackle John Deal for a loan of enough money to buy some Mexican cattle to restock the Long S range. I ain't liftin' a hand to stop you. I won't try to talk you outa what you're aimin' to do, but don't deal me in on it. From here on, it's your outfit. Do as you dang please with it."

Uncle Billy brushed the whittlings off and the blade of his stock-knife closed with a loud metallic snap. He got to his feet and walked off on bowed legs.

It was the first time since he'd first come here that he and the grizzled cowman had ever quarreled. Dave had expected him to blow up and that's why he'd kept putting it off. He expected Uncle Billy to bust out cussin, like he'd seen him do when he'd matched a race with a big maverick or when his ketch rope snapped, but he hadn't calculated on hurting the prideful old cowman. He saw Uncle Billy throw his saddle on the old flea bitten gray he called Uncle Dudley and watched him ride off along the trail that twisted through the brush until he was out of sight.

DAVE figured he should look clean and half-way respectable if he hoped to get a bank loan, so he stripped and took a warm bath, shaved and put on clean clothes. He saddled the best horse in his Long S string and headed for the border cowtown of Los Gatos.

Dave was headed across the mouth of Rough Canyon where it flattened out into a dry wash when he heard the brush crack up on the mountain side. He could hear Uncle Billy's high-pitched cowpuncher yelp echo between the rocky walls of rough canyon.

Dave reined his horse in behind some brush and watched.

Big Yaller came down the steep slant with headlong speed. Uncle Billy on Old Dudley a hundred yards behind, and wide open. His loop was cocked back across one faded denim shoulder and his old hat was yanked down at a slant across his squinted eyes. And until they hit the floor of the canyon it was a wild brush popper race. Then the dun-colored stag, the horse and rider were out of sight in the heavy brush and big boulders.

Dave waited for quite a while. Then half-way back up the side of the canyon he saw Big Yaller climbing slowly along the slanted trail that rimmed out in a low brushy saddle. Uncle Billy must have seen Dave about that same time. He yelled out a wild reckless challenge to Big Yaller for a re-match, and Dave could hear Uncle Billy's high pitched cursing.

Where the trail rimmed out the big dun stag had halted on the high rimrock, standing motionless as a long-horned statue carved from yellow rock. He stood there until he got his wind, then he tossed his wide horns and hooked his way through the thick brush. He was headed for Saddle Spring to water. He'd graze for a while, then crawl into the thick manzanita and lay down, bushed up. A man on horseback could ride by within a stone's throw and the wily renegade stag would never move and the cowhand would ride on without sighting him.

Uncle Billy got off and loosened his front cinch. He squatted and rolled a cigarette. After a while he would ride back to the ranch and unsaddle and make a pot of coffee and warm up the jerky and frijole beans. Content with the knowing that there was one more wild race left in him and his old cowhorse.

Dave Ryan came close to turning back. He could take Uncle Billy and they could round up half a dozen more drouthed-out cowmen and take a pack outfit across the line into Mexico—make a *pasear*.

The last revolution across the Mexican Border had killed off some Mexicans who owned vast Spanish Grants. Thousands of cattle roamed there, their ownership disputed by the Mexican ranchers who had escaped with their lives and were living on this side of the Border, self-exiled. If they went back to round up the cattle they claimed, they could be shot from their saddles or captured and 'dobe walled. One big Mexican rancher, thus exiled, offered ten dollars per head for all cattle brought out of Mexico, and he would pay the head tax.

Other exiled ranchers would wait for a cattle drive this side of the Border and claim what cattle were theirs, sell the cattle cheap to any man who had the nerve to make his Mexican roundup and get across the line. There were many hundreds of two, three and four year old mavericks with no brand on their hides, and those belonged to the man who got there first with a ketch rope and running iron.

All you had to pay was the head tax. Or if you could slip 'em across the Border when the moon was right, without getting picked up by the Border Patrol riders, the cattle belonged to you when you got them dumped on your home range. They were called "wet cattle." Border jumper cowhands called such expeditions *pasears*. Just a pleasure trip into Mexico, was the translation. The free translation was something else, again. It was called cattle rustling. But every cowman who called it that had a tongue in his cheek. Big outfits, reputed respectable, were buying "wet cattle," delivered on their range and paid for in cash on the barrelhead.

NOT even the men who rode Border Patrol could look down their lawnoses at the men who had the nerve and cunning and cowpuncher savvy to make a *pasear* into Mexico and get the cattle across the line without paying head tax. Whether or not they were willing to admit it, their hats were off to those Border-jumper cowhands.

Every cowhand along the Border talked about making one of those *pasears* into Old Mexico, but few dared tackle it. If they were caught down below, they didn't have a leg to stand on. They were cattle thieves and the penalty was to be stood against an adobe wall and shot. A lot of wild reckless cowhands who went down below the Border never came back. They vanished and no more was ever heard of them.

Now and then a horse showed up, sore backed, spur marked, barefooted, leg weary and gaunt flanked from hard riding. But the man who owned the horse never came back to die on his own soil.

Uncle Billy and Dave Ryan had talked some about making one of those *pasears* when they had sat around watching the green grass grow and only a lone wild stag in the Long S iron to graze it off.

"Looks like the only thing left fer us to do, Dave, is to make a li'l' ol' cattle gatherment below the line."

"Whenever you're ready, Uncle Billy," Dave had agreed.

"Directly these ponies of our'n put on a leetle more taller." The old cowman kept putting it off. "A man's gotta have a stout horse between his laigs. I been down there before."

But Uncle Billy was getting a little too old to endure the hardships, and Dave's was a half-hearted agreement. They kept waiting for a lucky windfall. Just what the lucky break would be, neither of them knew. It was like waiting for some rich uncle to die and leave the Long S outfit a million dollars, and there was no such rich uncle.

Dave Ryan was torn with indecision. There was something about that wild race down the slope that was almighty splendid. Heroic. It stood for something high and mighty and out of the younger cowman's reach, and Dave knew it. He wanted to catch up with Uncle Billy and ride home and tell him it was about time they quit talking about that *pasear* and hit the trail south in the morning.

"That danged ornery old warthog!" Dave grinned mirthlessly. Half amused, half annoyed.

Dave was willing to bet that Uncle Billy had staged that wild race with a deliberate purpose in mind. He knew where to locate Big Yaller up high in Rough Canyon. He'd slipped around through the brushy saddle and when he'd sighted the big dun stag bushed up, he'd waited until he saw Dave headed along the trail to town. Then he'd put on a show for Dave's special benefit by matching that wild hell-bent race, knowing full well that Dave would get its meaning. An old white haired brush popper cowhand, forking a pensioned off, stove up, flea bitten cowhorse, picking up the challenge of an ancient renegade longhorned stag, the last of the Long S herd. The sole spectator, a man who'd grabbed a tail-holt on the Long S by picking up a mortgage on the outfit when cattle were fat and it was a filaree year—a man who'd been run out of Wyoming. Then, when the outfit had been drouthed-out, this Dave Ryan had reached out for a crying towel. He'd turned jellybean and headed for town to borrow money from the very man whose insides Uncle Billy hated—the man who had pokered him out of the Long S.

His own words came back to mock Dave now. "We're outa the cow business, Uncle Billy."

And later on that evening the grizzled cowman had pointed to the dun stag watering after dark. "First time I ever ketched you in a lie, Dave."

According to the lights of that old-timer, young Dave Ryan lacked what it took to be a cattleman and play his string out. Moreover, Uncle Billy Scarborough, who was tough as an old boot, had put on a show to prove it.

The cold, empty sick feeling came back into Dave Ryan's stomach. It was the same feeling that was inside him when the gun-slingers had run him out of Wyoming, when those masked men in long saddle slickers had cussed him out with all the fighting names on earth and made him swallow it. He'd even now wake up in the middle of the night bathed in a clammy sweat and his six-shooter gripped in his hand, cursing himself for the yellow backed coward and quitter those men had called him.

Dave Ryan wore that coward brand deep inside, where it never healed. He felt it now, like lead weighting his heart. It tied his stomach in a knot.

He poured the last of his tobacco into the last brown cigarette paper he had. When the paper broke in his unsteady hands he looked down at the flaky tobacco that sprinkled his shirt. His grin was a bitter, twisted line.

"You yellow backed quitter," he told himself, "You haven't the nerve to look that old-timer in the eye."

Dave Ryan mentally quirted himself all the way to town. He called himself all the ugly names he could think up. He recalled things he'd told Uncle Billy when he bought the place, when he'd set fire to the mortgage and lit his cigarette with its flame, for all the world like some get rich quick millionaire he'd read about lighting a big cigar with a hundred dollar bill.

"I got a bellyful of runnin' away, lookin' back like some coyote along my trail. This is as far as they kin run me. If they cold trail me here, I'll make a stand, regardless."

Dave Ryan sure talked a game fight when he ran off at the head to Uncle Billy. But he'd turned out to be no more than a loud-mouthed jellybean.

Be sure to wipe both feet on the welcome mat before you go inside the bank. Tip your hat. Beg your pardon, Mister Deal. I come here to beg a loan. I'm passin' the hat like a beggar. How's that again, please, Mister John Deal? Oh. Uncle Billy Scarborough? He's in good health. But he's too almighty prideful to come beggin' a dollar from the man who pokered him outa his Long S outfit!

"But not me. No *pasear* into Old Mexico for this hombre. It's easier to come a-beggin'."

Dave Ryan was still in that frame of mind when he rode into the border cowtown of Los Gatos in the middle of the afternoon. A cowboy, even if he is a lowdown coward, takes care of his horse first. Dave headed for the barn and feed corral at the edge of town.

III

DAVE paid little attention to the man sitting straddle of the high mesquite corral, who was a little drunk. He wore a pair of dirty Levis shoved into the tops of rusty boots. He had a pair of large roweled silver-mounted Mexican spurs strapped on. A shapeless old hat slanted on dank rust-colored uncut hair and wiry rust-colored whiskers covered his lean jaws. His large nose was sunburnt and peeled and his bloodshot green eyes were squinted as they looked Dave Ryan and his Long S horse over. An old cartridge belt studded with .45 cartridges sagged about his lean flanks and a white bone-handled six-shooter was in an open holster that was tied down on his saddle-muscled thigh. He had a half-emptied quart of colorless tequila in his hand, the cork gripped between large strong yellowed teeth.

He grinned and spat the cork out, aiming it at Dave's hat but it went past Dave's nose. Dave looked up at the man, then he saw the bone-handled gun and he stiffened in his saddle. His right hand dropped to the gun in his chaps pocket.

"Have a drink." A long arm thrust the bottle at him.

Dave didn't want a drink, but he took the bottle. The glass felt warm. He held it in his left hand and his eyes watched the man on the corral warily as he tilted the bottle. The raw, potent peppery tasting tequila was almost hot in his mouth. He swallowed quickly and a cough rose in his throat.

"Take another 'un to settle the smoke." The big man was grinning.

Dave took another big swallow of the stuff and handed back the bottle.

"How's that danged cranky old Long S warthog?" He gripped the neck of the bottle and kept swallowing.

Dave watched the prominent Adam's apple bobbing up and down like a cork in his corded sunburnt neck. "Uncle Billy's doin' all right."

"You must be the feller Square Deal sent out to take his outfit over?" He didn't give Dave a chance to answer. "I hear you got dried out. Along with all the other hard-luck outfits. There's two-three horses here in the feed yard belongin' to a few of 'em. They come to town to beg Square Deal fer a loan but they'd been more likely to squeeze blood from a granite boulder. Them sorry dried-out cowmen is down acrost the line right now drowndin' their sorrows in rotgut." His eyes were wary, cunning.

"Uncle Billy send you in to beg a loan?"

Dave felt his face get hot. The warm tequila was churning inside his empty stomach and he was getting a little drunk. He didn't have a chance to answer.

"Not him!" The lanky red-whiskered man chuckled. "Not that prideful ol' devil. I worked for him when I was a kid. He gimme my first job punching cows. He learnt me aplenty. He took me along into Mexico. We got drunk with the Federalistas. Then a week later we got drunk with the Villistas. Uncle Billy and Pancho Villa drunk outa the same wine sack while his men rounded up more cattle than we could drive. So Villa sent his men along and we shoved better'n a thousand head acrost to the tune of *La Cucaracha.* Some of Villa's men went ahead to cut the fence. Uncle Billy Scarborough is *muy hombre.* I don't know what you'd call him up in Wyoming."

He ignored Dave's right hand that gripped the butt of his gun, and waved him on with the almost empty bottle.

"Put up that Long S horse. Then dust yourself off and go in by the side door of Square Deal's bank. I'll be a-settin' right here on this mesquite pen when you git back. You kin tell Square Deal that booze you just drank came from Booger Red's bottle.

"I got a thousand head of Mexican dogies a-waitin' fer me just below the Border. I pokered the whole herd away to one of Square Deal's tinhorns last night at his International Club. But they cold decked me, and I'll see Square Deal in hell before I deliver 'em. That's what I just finished telling Square Deal in his bank. I walked out the front door and the doorman locked it after me."

He drained the bottle, then crashed it on the mesquite corral. He saluted Dave Ryan with the jagged weapon, his green eyes glittering. This Booger Red was ugly drunk and hunting for bad trouble.

There was no mistaking the man now. He was the man in the yellow slicker, with another smashed bottle in his hand. Below the wicked eyes had been tied a black silk neck handkerchief. To this man Dave Ryan owed his life. And it was going to be a dangerous debt to pay off. Perhaps he would go even deeper in debt to the renegade Border-jumper called Booger Red—for a thousand head of cattle.

Now was as good a time as any. It might have been the tequila working. Dave looked up at him with a flat grin. When he opened his mouth to speak, the big man straddling the corral shook his head.

"Save it till you git back. It don't take no mind reader to know what you want to lay on the line for a proposition. I'll be ridin' this fence an' workin' on a fresh bottle when you git back. Mebbyso me'n you will be camped down yonder singin' to 'em about second guard time. *Quien sabe? Vamanos,* Ryan!"

Booger Red made it sound like a threat. His bloodshot eyes were wicked and angry and there was a contemptuous twist to his leering grin. He paid no attention whatever to the gun gripped in Dave Ryan's sweaty hand. He was dismissing him like he was sending some dirty-nosed kid on a senseless errand—such as to ask a man for the loan of a left handed ketch rope.

And Dave Ryan had to take it.

IV

HE was half blinded by futile seething anger when he found the side door of the bank unlocked, opened it and walked inside. Coming from the bright sun glare into the dark shadow of the short hallway he blinked his eyes and collided headlong with a man and a woman who were just leaving the bank.

"Watch where you're goin', stumblebum." The man was big. He reached out and grabbed the front of Dave's shirt. The shirt, rotted by too many washings, ripped from neckband to shirt tail, jerking him off-balance.

Dave wasn't paying the big man any attention. He was staring at the girl, yanking off his hat, flushed and awkward with embarrassment. The girl had stumbled a little and Dave reached out quickly to grab her arm to keep her from falling.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am—"

Something hit him hard alongside the jaw and cut off his apology. Dave reeled backward. He saw the dull glint of the blued steel gun barrel as it chopped down across his head. Everything was a red-black pinwheel inside his head. His knees buckled and he went down like a beef knocked in the head by an axe.

Dave Ryan came alive inside John Deal's office. Somebody had dropped his limp carcass into a big leather cushioned armchair and left him there. His eyes blinked open against a dull throbbing pain. He saw John Deal sitting in a swivel chair behind a highly polished flat topped Mexican mahogany desk.

John Square Deal, high stake gambling man south of the line, respectable banker north of the Border, was a handsome man with carefully trimmed iron-gray hair and clipped mustache. He was well barbered, well tailored in a salt and pepper worsted double-breasted suit, spotless white shirt and a dark wine-colored silk tie in which was stuck a diamond horseshoe tie pin. A diamond ring was on his well kept hands. His olive skin was stretched tightly across his cheek bones and along his lean jaw. He had an aquiline nose and a thin-lipped mouth and his eyes were gray and hard as polished steel.

"There are times," Deal spoke in a toneless voice, "when Jack Law is apt to carry his ramrod job too far."

Dave sat up slowly. One side of his jaw was rapidly swelling. His hand went up to feel the knot on his head. It felt sticky and when he looked at his hand there was blood on it. He saw his hat lying on the Mexican tiled floor at his feet. It had a crushed-in look like somebody had deliberately stepped on it. Pain stabbed through his head as he bent over and picked it up and shaped it as best he could. When he looked around the room he saw that the door was closed and they were alone. He looked across the desk at the banker. The silence was beginning to grow uneasy, when Deal's toneless voice broke it.

"You're the last of the drouthed out cowmen to show up, wanting a loan. I had to turn them all down. I run my Border Bank strictly within the rules and regulations of the banking laws. Eventually the bank will own those ranches.

"I'm a gambler by profession. But I don't gamble with the bank money that's entrusted to me. Do I make myself plain, Ryan?"

"Plenty." Dave pulled his hat down across his aching head and started to get to his feet.

"Sit down, Ryan." His toneless voice made it something of a command.

DAVE got to his feet. He was taking no orders from the banker. He had taken his six-shooter from the pocket of his chaps and shoved it down inside the waistband of his levis. His hand reached back instinctively to make sure that the gun was still there, hung by the hinged clip that covered the cylinder.

Deal's eyes narrowed and his right hand rested on the desk within quick reach of the gun he carried underneath his coat in an armpit holster. Poker faced, he watch Dave's hand straighten the gun and come away.

"Would a thousand head of Mexican cattle restock your drouthed-out Long S range, Ryan?"

"Yes." Dave spoke, slowly, his eyes watching the gambler. He figured he knew what was coming.

"I own the bank and the International Club across the line. You've no doubt been there. But I don't think you've ever been in one back room marked PRIVATE where the poker chips are all one yellow color etched in black with a longhorned steer head, each chip representing a cow-brute. The room is reserved for cattlemen. It was there that Uncle Billy Scarborough gambled his Long S outfit away to me and signed the mortgage on his outfit on a poker table.

"I keep the International Club money here in my bank in a separate account." Deal smiled thinly, and a tiny spark of sardonic humor gave light to his cold eyes.

"The banker's right hand," he explained, "don't know what the gambler's left hand is doing. Not that I am ashamed of my gambler's profession because my games are all on the square, and I pride myself on that moniker Square Deal.

"A banker is supposed to be respectable and above reproach. I built a three story solid brick house on this side of the Border as a monument to that respectability because I have a wife that is as fine and decent and good, as the finest lady in the land. And I have a grown daughter." His thin smile twisted faintly. "You just bumped into Ramona, as you came in."

"Yeah." Dave Ryan stood there with a mirthless grin on his face.

The banker reached into a cigar humidor and took out a long thin twisted cigar and bit off the end and lit it.

"The International Club won a thousand head of cattle last night from a renegade Border-jumper called Booger Red O'Hara. Jack Law, the man who rapped you to sleep with a gun barrel, was the dealer who pokered Booger Red out of the cattle drive he'd fetched up out of Chihuahua. This is no Border Bank deal, so there'll be no scratch of any pen on paper. I'll pay the head tax when the cattle cross the line. I'll get word to the Border Patrol to pass the herd. I'll pay the damages and put 'em in the Long S iron."

Deal filled two shot glasses from a bottle of bonded whiskey he took from his desk drawer and got to his feet, shaking the legs of his creased pants down over the tops of his polished black boots. He lifted his glass.

Dave Ryan had a twisted grin on his face as he reached for his drink.

"Salud!" said the poker faced Deal.

"Salud!" echoed Dave Ryan.

Their eyes met and held as they downed the aged smooth whiskey.

"There's a catch to it." Deal's eyes were cold, merciless. "Booger Red welched on his bet."

"Your whiskey," grinned Dave slowly, "took the taste of Booger Red's luke warm tequila out of my mouth."

"I'm not holding you to any sort of bargain we drank on." His cold eyes were probing deep. "But I know more about you than you think."

"I never tried to cover my back trail from Wyoming. I kept my own name."

"I take most men at their face value. But no man ever double-crossed Square Deal—twice."

Dave nodded briefly.

DEAL told him, "You're on your own when you leave this bank, but before you go, I'll tip you off. Uncle Billy Scarborough you already know for a man you can tie to. Booger Red O'Hara is big and tough. If he likes you he'll go the limit, and he does his fighting in the open. He's a man who declares himself for the whole wide world to hear. You can use your own judgment about telling him about the deal we made. Jack Law is treacherous as he is dangerous. He's a top cowhand, a fast gunslinger, and a tinhorn gambler. He's got the job of running my cow outfit that brands the Carpenter's Square.

"Up until recently Booger Red O'Hara and Jack Law were sort of side-partners. Renegades. Border-jumpers. Then somewhere, somehow, they had a falling out. That's where their trails forked.

"When Jack Law told me he'd pokered Booger Red out of a thousand head of cattle, I didn't like the look in his eyes. I told him flatly that those cattle would never go into the Square iron.

"My daughter Ramona was here. That girl should have been born a boy. She's better than most men around a ranch. That's why I gave her the outfit and registered the Square iron in her name. She's headstrong and wild as a young colt but she's all thoroughbred and clean as the wind. I've let her have her own way and lead her own life."

His hands clenched like he was gripping something inside him.

"Up until now, Ryan, I've never had cause to regret giving her a free rein. . . . But now, right now, I'm not so sure. That kid of mine is in danger. If I try to pull her up with a spade bit, she'll take the bit in her teeth and stampede and the high tight barb wire fence she'll run into will play the devil with the finest, cleanest youngster on earth."

Dave watched the man's hand slowly shove in under his coat and he knew that Deal's fingers had closed around the butt of a gun.

"Before that happens to that kid of mine—" Deal's eyes were bleak.

The notion struck Dave suddenly that John Square Deal was trying to bribe him and was using Booger Red's cattle with the disputed ownership for some sort of a bribe. He knew that Deal was going against his second nature when he confided in any man. He could have a shrewd, cold, calculating purpose behind it. It would be more typical of the gambling man who had turned respectable banker, and he was cunning enough to play it that way.

"Me'n Uncle Billy," Dave said quietly, "need cattle. We're broke. We'll pay for what cattle out of Booger Red's thousand head we put in the Long S iron as quick as we put taller on their ribs and sell 'em at a good price. And it might be Booger Red that gits the money, not Square Deal. It all depends on which way the wind blows. I reckon you understand. I'm takin' my own risks when I throw in with Booger Red and I'm playin' my hand accordin'."

Deal's hand came away from his gun. Dave thumbed back his hat and passed the palm of his hand across the knot on his head, and his hand came away blood smeared.

"If it's Jack Law you're talkin' about," Dave wiped the blood off on his torn shirt, "I'd be proud to tackle that job, free of charge."

"I wasn't tryin' to hire your gun, Ryan. You got me wrong." Deal smiled thinly. "I take care of my own family troubles. Do my own killing, if it comes down to cases. It's a matter of pride with me."

DEAL walked over to a map similar to the ones used in schoolrooms. It rolled up like a window blind in a wooden case. He pulled the map down. It was a large detailed map, made by a skilled draughtsman, showing that section of New Mexico and part of Old Mexico below the Border, with the large holdings that Deal claimed marked off in red ink along the exact boundaries and marked with his Square brand. Likewise the ranches of several drouthed-out cowmen, each outfit marked with the owner's brand, outlined in red and black borders.

"Everything inside the red line is land that I've deeded over to my daughter Ramona. What's inside the red and black borders is what I hold mortgage paper on. My ownership is problematical."

Deal pointed with a long-bladed ivory paper knife to the land marked with the Long S brand, outlined in heavy black ink and the name of Scarborough written below the brand.

"I wrote that in long before Uncle Billy pokered the Long S away. His name is there to stay." Deal relit his twisted cigar and his eyes watched Dave through the smoke haze.

"The money you paid over when you lifted the mortgage was put on deposit in your name in the Border Bank. I can show it to you on the books."

"Well I'll be danged!" Dave spoke like a man who'd just had the wind punched out of him.

"Exactly. As long as Uncle Billy Scarborough is alive, he owns the Long S outfit." He let the map roll into its wooden case.

"When Jack Law told me he was claiming those drouthed out ranches and the Long S to boot, I let him talk. When he said he was using Booger Red's cattle to restock the range, I still checked the bet to him.

"But when he told me he was going to marry my daughter, I reached for my gun. I'd have killed him if he hadn't stepped in behind Ramona who happened to be in my office. When she spoke up and said she was going to marry Jack Law, I told her I would rather see her dead. I still had my gun in my hand when he backed out the door, taking her with him, hiding behind her when she closed the door. They were gone when I found you and brought you in here." Deal spat the half-smoked cigar into the brass cuspidor alongside the desk.

"I had Booger Red O'Hara in mind for a ramrod when I give the Square outfit to my kid, but she picked Jack Law. O'Hara is so homely he scares timid folks. That's why they call him Booger.

"Jack Law is big and handsome and has a way with women. They can't see the snake in his veins. As soon as he got a foothold, he fired the Mexican vaqueros I had hired and hired renegades like himself. They'd been rounded up in Wyoming after you left, shipped out on a train and told never to come back. Jack Law knew where to locate 'em and they've been drifting into the Square headquarters ranch, like they were moving in to stay."

"I've heard about it," said Dave Ryan. "You told Uncle Billy?"

"No. I didn't want to worry him."

"Somebody told him. He knows all about it. Could be he kept quiet for the same reason. He didn't want to worry you. The ornery old warthog thinks I'm the man who fetched them in. Uncle Billy can be mule headed. But he should know Square Deal better than that."

"Uncle Billy," grinned Dave, "might know he was wrong, but he won't admit it, even to himself." He tucked in his torn shirt.

"Time I got goin'. I left Booger Red astraddle of the feed corral where he said he'd be when I got back, workin' on a fresh bottle."

"I wouldn't keep him waitin' too long." Deal opened the door of his office and walked down the narrow hallway to the side door and opened that.

"We both know where we stand, now, Ryan. Both on dangerous ground." He held out his hand. "Jack Law is my wolf meat."

"I've run into your daughter Ramona a few times since I come to the country. Mostly it was out on the range. And I've danced with her at a few bailes. We got along fine. If Jack Law' gets in my way, it's goin' to be me or him. And I hope it's me."

"So far as I'm concerned, it's an open field. I'd be proud to claim you as a son-in-law. Good luck, Dave. You'll need it."

V

BOOGER RED was no longer straddling the fence. He had thrown his other leg over and both boot-heels were hooked there. He waved a half-emptied bottle at Dave. His slitted eyes looked at Dave's torn shirt and at the knot under his tilted hatbrim, the hair crusted with drying blood. His wide mouth grinned derisively.

"Did Square Deal dirty his hands on you, Ryan?" He shoved the bottle at Dave. "Or did he git his hired man Jack Law to throw you back out in the street?"

"How much do you want for them sorry Mexican dogies of your'n? Laid down on the Long S range?" Dave ignored the proffered bottle.

"When I turn 'em loose on the Long S range, mister," said Booger Red flatly, "I'll make my dicker with Uncle Billy Scarborough." He slid down and his big roweled Mexican spurs jangled mockingly when his feet struck the ground. The grin had died and his eyes looked wicked.

He tilted the bottle and let the warm tequila trickle into his mouth, and gargled noisily with his mouth wide open. Then he lowered his head and spat the mouthful out on the ground at Dave's feet. Some of it splashed on his boots.

Dave clawed for his gun and the hammer was thumbed back when it pointed at the big man's stomach.

Booger Red's slivered green eyes looked down at the gun. The bottle he held in his hand made a swift slithering arc as it chopped down on the gun barrel and Dave's finger twitched on the trigger. The explosion of the .45 cartridge sounded loud. The slug ripped a furrow along the dusty ground between Booger Red's widespread boots. The gun was twisted out of Dave's hand. It was in the big man's fist now, and he held the jagged edge of the smashed bottle in his other hand. He had the six-shooter gripped by the barrel.

"Don't waste 'em thataway." He handed the gun back to Dave, butt first. "If you run up ag'in Jack Law and them renegade cowhands he's got workin' fer the Square, you might need all the gun lead you got."

Booger Red tossed the jagged bottle in a trash barrel and his grin was wolfish.

"That cost me a little likker, but I reckon it was worth it. I found out you'd do to take along on a *pasear.*"

He went into the barn, his spurs clanging with each step. He came out leading two saddled horses. One of the horses had Dave's saddle on its back and there was a carbine shoved into a scabbard that hung by a strap from the horn.

"Every man has his own way of packin' a saddle gun. I left it fer you to fix." Booger Red swung into his saddle.

There was an overpowering ruthlessness about this big red muzzled rawboned man with the bottle-glass green eyes that made Dave Ryan feel as awkward as a greenhorn. For all his bragging whiskey talk he gave the impression of a man eager to back up his threats. Cunning, merciless, tough as rawhide, he had taunted Dave into making a gun play and showed him up for a rank pilgrim. But he had a method behind everything he said or did.

He left Dave all confused, mixed up in his mind about the sort of man he actually was. He hated and distrusted Booger Red, and at the same time he had a hidden admiration for him.

If this was going to be a proving round, then Dave would play his tough string out. He slid the gun scabbard so that it went underneath the right stirrup fender and under the knee joint where the bulge would fit into the bend of his knee. He looked at the brand on his horse, before he forked the saddle. The gelding, a solid mahogany bay, had Square Deal's Carpenter's Square on his left thigh and the brand had been vented. The horse Booger Red rode had a similar brand.

DAVE had just shoved his right foot in the stirrup when the sound of shooting blasted the stillness. It came from up the wide dusty street towards the Border Bank. Half a dozen riders, their horses spurred to a run, were shooting up the town, their drunken shouts punctuated by the roaring explosions of .45 cartridges. Riding stirrup to stirrup, kicking up a heavy dust cloud behind, their bullets kicked up the dust ahead.

Dogs barked, then ran for cover, their tails between their legs. Horses tied to the hitch-rack lunged back, breaking the bridle reins and stampeding, stirrups popping. A bunch of gaily feathered bantams scratching out in the street, cackled hysterically and scattered. One gamecock, his head shot off, floundered in the dust, spouting blood.

The riders were headed at a high run down the street toward the livery and feed barn and the high mesquite corral.

"Git in here! Pronto!"

Booger Red jumped his horse into the barn and jerked his .30-30 saddle carbine from its scabbard. Dave followed suit. Booger Red's big tobacco stained teeth were bared.

"Looks like Jack Law sent out his bill collectors. We got what it takes fer final payment. Shoot for their stomachs and don't waste good ca'tridges. You could kill 'em all, and not get ary good man outa the lot."

The men were charging down in a cloud of swirling dust. Just as a top surrey, drawn by a matched team of dark bays, rounded the corner of the two-storied brick building John Deal had erected to house his Border Bank.

Ramona Deal handled the lines of the high spirited bays like an expert, holding them down to a fast trot that made the wheels spin. A woman sat in the back seat, a black silk-fringed mantilla with large red roses heavily embroidered was held above her graying black hair by a tortoise shell Spanish comb. A tan light weight lap robe across her lap to keep out the dust. The woman was Deal's wife and the mother of the girl who drove the team. A handsome woman with Spanish blood in her veins. She had been a beautiful girl who had matured into a handsome woman.

The rig rounded the corner of the bank and was all but ridden down by the drunken renegade cowhands. The surrey had come to pick up the banker and take him home. Square Deal had stepped out of the front door of his bank and was met with a volley of shots.

Deal staggered forward a couple of steps, slid his gun from the shoulder holster and commenced shooting, his legs spread to hold his balance. He went down, his gun spewing fire. One of the men went off backwards. Another rider dropped his gun and clawed for the saddlehorn. They never slacked rein as they rode past, shooting at the wounded man on the wide plank sidewalk. Glass shattered as some of the shots went wild, breaking the windows.

The surrey team reared, then lunged into their collars. Terrified by the yelling and shooting, they almost upset the rig. If the girl hadn't been an expert driver the surrey would have been wrecked. She swung the runaway team down the street that lengthened into the stagecoach road. It led past the barn where Booger Red and Dave Ryan sat their horses.

"Git across the street, on the far side, Ryan. I'll stay here. Don't move till the rig passes in betwixt us. Then open 'er wide. We'll lane that team and both grab a bridle at the same time. Don't reach out till I holler, or you'll turn the team and it'll be a wreck. Git!"

Dave jumped his horse out of the barn and a few scattered shots whined too close. Behind the runaway team he could see the riders fan out and scatter and quit the main street, all but hidden in the swirling yellow dust of the runaway. Dave owed his life to that dust cloud. He slid his horse to a halt, waiting for the runaway horses to come abreast of him. He saw Booger Red ride out and pull up, leaving the way clear.

Dave's blood pulsed in his throat as he watched the runaway team rapidly close the distance. He saw the girl's face, pale underneath the suntan. She had on an olive green dress and her hat had come off and her heavy black hair, copper tinted, had tumbled down. Her gloved hands sawed at the lines and she had one foot braced against the dashboard. Her mother sat in the back seat, clinging onto the side, her face chalk white.

As the runaway team came between the two men, they both spurred their horses. They came from behind and neither the mother nor the girl even noticed them until they rode past the surrey and alongside the team, closing in, until the team and saddle horses raced neck to neck. Both riders nosed past the team.

"Now!" Booger Red's voice sounded flatly across the pounding hoofs and the rattle of wheels.

DAVE'S right hand reached out and caught the buggy line just behind the bit. Booger Red did the same. They pulled steadily back and slowed the bay team down to a lope and then a trot and finally to a halt. By that time they were half a mile beyond town.

"I got 'em, boys!" Ramona Deal's voice was steady.

Dave and Booger Red let go. The bay team dripped sweat and the horses were blowing hard. Ramona turned them around and headed back for town. Both men rode alongside the rig. Booger Red pulled off his hat. His homely face was sweat beaded.

"God bless you," Mrs. Deal said, "And you too, young man. I'll say a prayer for you later."

There was a small crowd gathering around the wounded man in the doorway of the bank building. When they came up, the crowd opened and made a lane for the surrey. Booger Red told a couple of the men to hold the team, and for them to drag the renegades' dead carcasses off the street out of sight.

Deal was sitting on the plank walk, his back propped against the brick wall. He looked at Dave and then at Booger Red. His eyes thanked them.

Both women knelt on either side of the wounded man. A doctor had his black bag opened.

"Not yet, Doc." Deal's voice sounded gritty. "Not till I git home. Booger Red and Dave will load me in the rig."

Deal's tailored suit and white shirt were bloodstained. He had been hit by half a dozen bullets and was still numb from shock. The pain was yet to come in full force.

His wife's dark brown eyes showed dark shadows of dread and grief as she looked up. Deal forced a grin as he held her hand.

"Will somebody please bring the Padre?" she spoke in Spanish.

Some small Mexican boys who had been watching, wide eyed, now turned and ran, making it a race to get to the Padre at the old Mission, their voices shrill as their bare feet kicked up the dust.

Deal gritted his teeth as they laid him on the back seat of the surrey. "I'm not ready to die," Deal had told his wife. When he looked at her there was a softness in his eyes. This Square Deal, gambler, loved his wife. Perhaps it was for her he'd turned banker.

"I'm turning the deal over to you," Deal told Booger Red. "You know how to deal 'em. Take care you come back alive and fetch Dave Ryan back with you."

Dave helped Ramona up over the cramped front wheel onto the front seat and her gloved hand tightened in his.

"When Jack Law's gunmen shot down my father," Ramona said loud enough for them all to hear, "he released me from my promise of marriage. I only said I would marry him because he threatened to kill my father unless I married him. That tinhorn sport broke his word.

"I'll expect you at the house when you come back, Dave, and I'll try to thank you for what you did." She smiled the deep promise in her eyes, leaving Dave Ryan numbed and tongue tied.

Booger Red was helping Deal's wife up onto the front seat.

"*Gracias,* Vincent." A motherly frown went with her gentle smile. "You forgot to come to see me this time. I hope you have quit drinking."

"Yes ma'm."

The big tough cowhand stood like an awkward school kid, his hat in his hand.

"Them folks in Mexico sent their best regards. They built a little shrine for you in the hills and candles always burn there. I promise to cut down on the drinkin' and gamblin'."

His eyes cut a desperate look at Ramona. She winked and tightened the lines, and the rig got under way.

Ramona's gloved hand went to her lips and she leaned out and her hand touched Dave's mouth.

"*Vamanos,*" Booger Red said harshly. "Let's git!"

"Some fellers git paid off with a promise," growled the big red headed Border-jumper as they headed for the gateway into Mexico. "All I got was a scoldin'." His sun bleached brows pulled together.

"Only the Senora calls me Vincent. From anybody else it's a fightin' name."

TWO Border Patrol men stood at the gateway in the high barbed wire fence that marked the international boundary. Both were dressed in cowpuncher clothes. Only the badges on their shirts told that they were law officers. They looked Dave Ryan over closely, and called Booger Red by name.

Booger Red took a leather covered vest pocket tally book from his pocket. He carefully tore out a page that was covered with brands and figures, and handed it over to the man whose badge was lettered Inspector.

"Still reppin' for the Senora?"

"Until I die," said Booger Red. "Her prayers are keepin' me alive. I'm crossing a thousand head, before mornin'. We might spill a few head along the road. The Senora'll pay the head tax. You boys might as well go home and git a good night's sleep."

"Jack Law just crossed with his tough outfit."

"I'll be watchin' out for that gringo *cabron.* This is Dave Ryan, Uncle Billy Scarborough's pardner in the Long S."

"So we figgered. Uncle Billy left a message for you." He looked at Dave. "He went acrost with half a dozen drouthed-out cowmen on a *pasear* an hour ago. Said fer you to stick close to Booger Red, and he'd meet you down below the line." A grin spread across the inspector's leathery face.

"Uncle Billy said he'd run out of cattle and outa smokin' tobacco at the same time. He come down here to lay in a fresh supply. Like old times, Booger Red. You teamed up again?"

Booger Red pulled the cork on a bottle and handed it to the inspector.

"You know danged well we don't never drink while we're on duty."

"I figgered you was goin' home to bed." Booger Red grinned flatly.

The inspector drank and handed the bottle to the younger Border Patrol man. Jerking his thumb in Booger Red's direction, he said:

"Square Deal turns over his Saturday night's take at the International Club to his Senora to put in the collection basket at mass. The Senora sometimes takes out a fifty-fifty cut and gives it to Booger Red. He goes down into Chihuahua with it and pays them *paisanos* cash for what cattle they round up and help him drive back. And this big red-muzzled jasper has the gall to sell them Mex dogies to Square Deal. And Deal makes his daughter Ramona a present of the cattle. It's a shore deep secret. None of 'em is supposed to know what the others are doin'. They never let on to one another."

His low chuckle died out as his puckered eyes hardened.

"Then this no-good *cabron* Jack Law showed up. Booger Red and him was once pardners in Wyoming until they split the blankets and busted up. This might be the big showdown." He fingered the law badge pinned to his shirt.

"I could shed this tin badge, Booger, if your outfit is short handed."

"Nope. You got a missus and kids. I'll drop around one of these evenin's for a bait of her dried apple pie. So-long."

It was past sundown when they rode away. They had left the Border town behind when a group of riders rode up out of the dusk. Uncle Billy Scarborough rode in the lead.

VI

UNCLE BILLY grinned as he handed Dave a new sack of Bull Durham and a brand new book of wheat straw cigarette papers.

"Looks like you done snagged your best shirt, Dave."

"Last time I saw you," said Dave, "you'd lost another race with Big Yaller."

"The sucker bushed up on me'n my pony. These boys were waitin' fer me when I got home. When I stopped to pick you up I found out you'd a'ready throwed in with this big sorrel whiskered gent. So we come on ahead. Where's that herd of your'n, Booger?"

"We'll ride up on the outfit directly," said Booger Red. "Square Deal's been shot by some of Jack Law's renegades. It's a long odds gamble."

Uncle Billy's face looked gray. He stared off into the gathering darkness. "I hope he makes a live of it. I'd like to buy him a drink."

"It's about time, you mule skulled warthog. The Senora always asks about you. You're Ramona's godfather. What relation does that make Dave Ryan? Your godfather son-in-law?"

Uncle Billy crowded his horse close and peered into Dave's eyes. Dave felt his face redden.

"What you been up to, Dave?"

"Stoppin' runaways," said Booger Red.

He lifted his horse to a long lope and rode on ahead. The dim trail twisted through patches of mesquite where it sloped into a dry wash. The night's stillness was ripped by sudden gunfire. Booger Red had ridden into an ambush.

"Fan out!"

Uncle Billy's voice cracked like a bullwhip.

"Kill every last one of them bushwhackin' hellions!"

Booger Red's riderless horse came back towards them at a run.

Uncle Billy shouted something at Dave, but he had his horse spurred to a run. He had a head start and meant to keep it.

Somewhere ahead in the dark Dave could hear Jack Law's loud-mouthed shouted orders. He headed in the direction of that voice.

Uncle Billy was gaining on him. The half-dozen drouthed out cowmen had deployed and were riding about twenty feet apart, standing in their stirrups, saddle carbines gripped.

Jack Law's renegades had tanked up in town and the booze had given them false courage. Their drunken yelling mixed with the rattling gunfire.

The cowmen held their fire until they got something to shoot at. They made it a grim-lipped job. They were hard working cowmen by trade. Not a killer among 'em. Some of them had wives and kids they'd left behind and they meant, God willing, to get back to the home ranch, and with a few head of cattle. But if this *pasear* called for killing, they meant to shoot first and shoot to kill. They had no need of booze for courage. All of them had been in some kind of a gun ruckus like this and they had no need of further orders. It was every man for himself. They took the fight to the bushwhackers.

The renegades sat their horses behind the brush, yelling at one another to keep up their own courage. Shooting because the kicking recoil of a gun gave them a feeling of power. Most of their shooting was wild, aimless. They were a cold-blooded bushwhacking outfit. They ran in packs like coyotes. Alone, they lacked courage.

The cowmen rode straight at them. Some of the coyote pack got panicky and quit the brush, shooting back across their shoulders, making a running fight of it. They were shot loose from their saddles. Screams and howls of pain knifed through the gunfire and their profane blasphemy fouled the night.

Jack Law's cursing tried vainly to check their running retreat.

Dave felt the whining snarl of bullets and paid no attention. He was hearing only that voice of Jack Law's and he felt that nothing could stop him in his headlong charge.

UNCLE BILLY spurred alongside him. But he did not notice. His lips were flattened back and his white teeth showed. When the old cowman's horse out-distanced him he cussed through his teeth because Uncle Billy was in his way.

Dave sighted Booger Red staggering to his feet like a drunken man. He was hatless and his face was a red smear of blood. Dave shouted something at him as he charged past.

He saw Uncle Billy's horse stumble and try to catch his balance and then go down and his hind quarters go up and the horse turn over. Uncle Billy kicked his feet from the stirrups and let himself get thrown. He landed in a brush patch and Dave heard him cussing as he pawed free of the thorny catclaw thicket.

You couldn't tell now who was a renegade and who was a cowman. Half a dozen separate gunfights were in progress. Dave was surrounded by the ruckus. Horses with empty saddles stampeded and milled in the wild tangle.

Dave could no longer hear Jack Law's shouted cursing. He saw a lone rider spur out from behind the brush and he knew it was Jack Law. He was making a wide circle around the closed in fight and was headed back towards the Border. He was leaning across the saddlehorn and along the neck of his running horse.

Dave Ryan reined his horse a little to the left to head him off. Jack Law never saw him until Dave had cut off his escape. Dave let out a yell that straightened the renegade in his saddle. Jack Law's gun spat fire as he lifted his head and caught sight of Dave. Dave felt the whine of the bullet that fanned his head.

He was not given to profanity but all the fighting names this same Jack Law had called him in Wyoming, ugly dirty names that Dave had had to take from the man, that had been stored up in a poison sack inside him, came out now into the night for Jack Law to hear—shouted hoarsely, dry throated, so that they sounded above the intermittent gunfire that was no more than an occasional shot. Dave's voice drowned out the groans of the dying and the whining for mercy those dying renegades had never shown.

Dave held his fire until he got closer. That blast of profanity tended to unnerve the big swashbuckling renegade. It spoiled his aim and his shots went wild.

Dave was within fifty feet of Jack Law now. He could see the man's face in the moonlight. His skin had a white scared look, and it glistened with sweat. Dave didn't know he'd been shouting until he heard his own voice in his ears and it sounded unreal. When he clamped his jaws shut the sounds ceased. He had the feeling that he had rid himself of some poison, leaving him clean and fearless. He was no longer a coyote running with his bushy tail tucked between his legs.

Jack Law was the man who had run

him out of Wyoming and he was the man who had told Square Deal he was going to marry Ramona. Here was the man Dave Ryan had sworn to kill. The man with the white face and a gun in his hand that spat flame. Those were his bullets that whined and snarled past Dave Ryan's head. He was close now. Dave threw away his saddle gun, jerked out his six-shooter and thumbed the hammer back.

Dave stood in his stirrups. He let out a short, ugly laugh, and felt the recoil of his gun jerk in his hand. He saw Jack Law jerk as the .45 slug tore through him, and heard his scream of terror as he let go his gun and clawed at his stomach. Dave's second shot tore through both his hands. Dave could see his face now clammy with sweat, his jaw slack, a look of terror in his eyes.

Dave reined up and his slivered eyes stared at the man for a long moment, until he went over sideways and backwards. Dave rode off a way and stepped off his horse. He felt faint and sat down, resting his head on his chap clad knees.

Uncle Billy rode up on a borrowed horse and got down. "You hurt bad, Dave?"

DAVE fumbled for a handkerchief and wiped away the cold sweat. His face was drained of blood and it left his skin yellow. He looked up at the old cowman with bloodshot eyes and grinned faintly.

"Where you hurt, Dave?"

Dave picked his hat up off the ground and got to his feet. "Hurt? Nowheres, I reckon."

"I can't believe it."

Uncle Billy was pawing him all over He kept looking down at his hands expecting to find blood there.

"Take a step or two. Move your arms. Jack Law emptied his gun at you, and he don't shoot to miss."

Uncle Billy's voice had a waspish crotchety sound.

"You lookin' for that tobacco you give me, Uncle Billy, or you tryin' to pick my empty pockets?" Dave tried to keep the shakiness out of his voice. He was having the same trouble with his knees.

"You find Booger Red?" Dave asked.

"Yeah. Somebody parted his red hair with a .30-30 and he's madder'n a hornet because he made himself a sort of promise to send you back to Ramona Deal with a whole hide. Yonder he comes a-foggin'. I tied the cleanest shirt I could find acrost his head. He looks fer all the world like some ugly old hag with a bloody rag shawl tied down under his jaw."

Booger Red was cussing softly as he pulled up. Dave got back on his horse before the big red headed cowpuncher could take up pawing him where Uncle Billy had left off.

"Me'n you is shore workin' the Senora overtime with her prayin'." Booger Red was staring at Dave. "We better git back there."

The renegades had been wiped out. Every cowman in the outfit had a bullet nick to show for the ruckus, but they were all alive. When Booger Red's Mexicans, having heard the gunfire as they were holding the herd on the bed ground, came riding up, their boss told them to stay camped where they were, and to bury Jack Law and the dead renegades in the same long trench.

"There's plenty cattle left in Chihuahua when my *hombrecitos* bring this drive acrost," said Booger Red. "I'm bettin' Square Deal will make a live of it. None of you drouthed out sons will have any trouble gittin' money outa him. You kin gamble on it.

"You heard Square Deal tell me he was turnin' the deal over to me. While I got it, I'll squander it." He grinned wide and reached for the neck of a bottle in his chaps. He pulled out a shattered bottle, with a seal across the unpulled cork. As he stared at the broken bottle a look of anguish crossed his face.

"I felt wet along my laig. I figgered I was bleedin'."

He looked down at his chaps where a bullet had drilled through the leather pocket. He held the broken bottle and muttered something about using it on the man who spilled his last bottle with a bullet. Then he tossed it away. "The Senora says I drink too much. If Square Deal lives, I'll never take another drink. I ain't much of a hand at prayin', but I'm throwin' in right now with the Senora. I hope I'm in for a long drouth—Amen."

Dave Ryan and Uncle Billy said, "Amen." They didn't know that they had heard a prophecy voiced in the night over Chihuahua, Mexico.

THE wedding of Dave Ryan and Ramona Deal was celebrated as soon as John Deal was well enough to walk to the altar and give his daughter away. Los Gatos, both sides of the Border, declared a week's fiesta.

Before the wedding, Dave Ryan and Uncle Billy saddled their horses and headed towards Rough Canyon. They rimmed out through the brushy saddle and pulled up to let their horses blow.

Cattle grazed, fattening on the filaree. A big dun colored stag cautiously horned its way through the thick manzanita thicket and out onto the sandstone rimrock. He stood there motionless as a statue hacked out of yellow sandstone, head lifted, wide black horns shining, nostrils flared. When he got the smell of men and horses on the down wind, his head turned and looked at the two men on horseback. Big Yaller pawed the sandstone and shook his head from side to side, bawling his raucous challenge that echoed in the rocky walls of Rough Canyon, then he whirled and was gone, brush popping and crashing as he went down the slope.

Uncle Billy and Dave, loops cocked, grinned as they went down the steep slope in a hell-bent race. When they reached the floor of the canyon, they pulled up. They watched Big Yaller climb the slope until he reached the rimrock. His bellow of victory came down to the two men.

"Big Yaller has put so much taller on them danged ribs," said Dave, "he like to never made it back."

"We're still in the cow business, Dave." Uncle Billy's faded blue eyes were misted. "As long as Big Yaller roams the roughs."

BIG BEND National Park

Unspoiled Wilderness in Texas

By JOHN BLACK

ONE of the newest patches in Uncle Sam's quilt for preserving our wilderness heritage is the Big Bend National Park of Texas, set up in 1944.

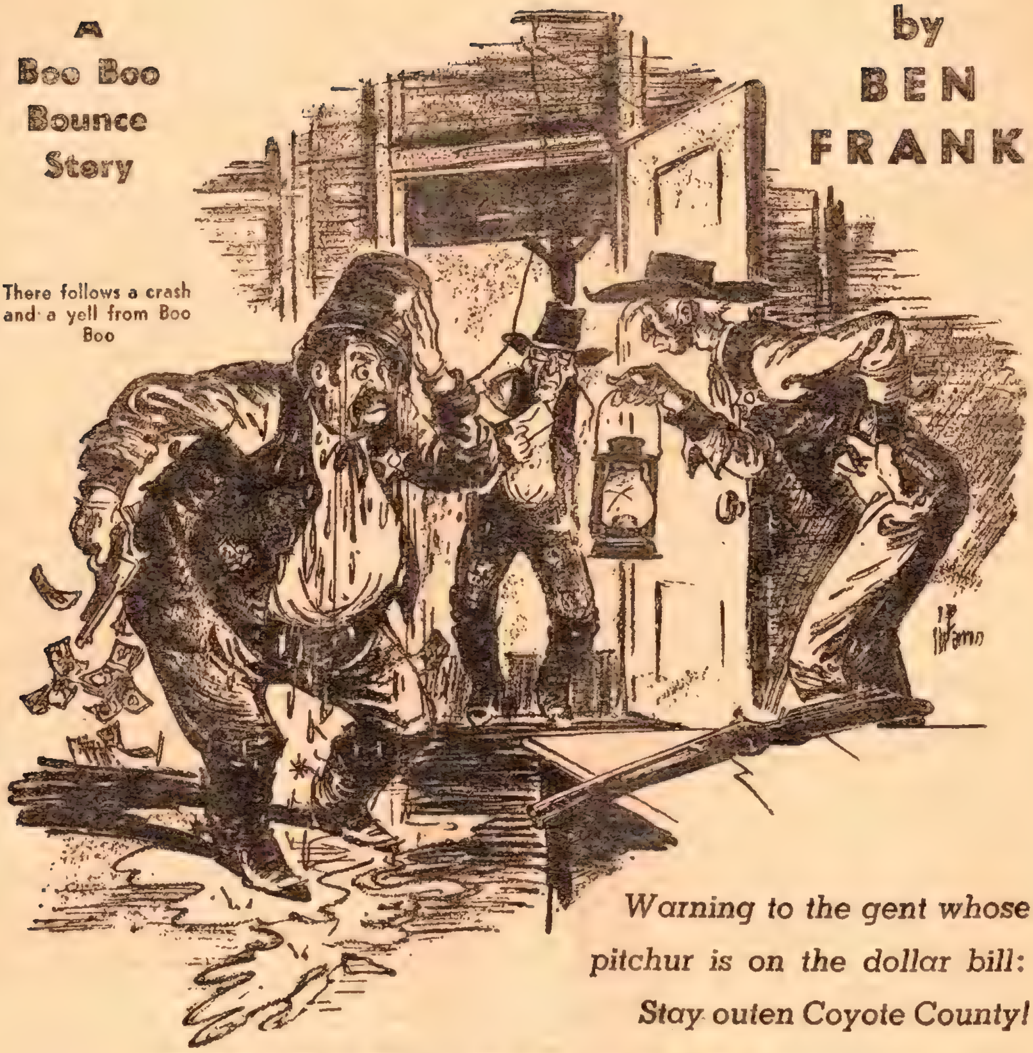
This 708,000 acre tract is one of the largest remaining tracts of pure, unspoiled desert, mountain and canyon country. It is still as isolated as it was 100 years ago, and just about as unpopulated. It has never been developed, or commercialized, or changed by man and it looks today substantially as it did thousands of years ago before men ever came upon the scene.

Oddly enough, for those who like the desert, it makes a good vacation resort, for the winter temperatures run a pleasant, dry 70 degrees on average and it is said that summer temperatures are not much higher and are mild and bracing.

Accommodations are still primitive and the one highway, U. S. 90, does not penetrate, but only comes close to Big Bend. It's strictly a pack and saddle proposition. But if it's unspoiled wilderness you crave, with rugged mountains and the wonderful silence of the vast spaces, Big Bend is for you!

A
Boo Boo
Bounce
Story

by
BEN
FRANK



There follows a crash and a yell from Boo Boo

Warning to the gent whose pitchur is on the dollar bill: Stay outen Coyote County!

ROOT OF EVIL, and no mistake

I AM picking my teeth after breakfast very content when my wife says unexpected, "Hopewell, I am going to spend today and tomorrow, visiting my sister. Leave me warn you that I will not stand for no foolishness whilst I am gone!"

"Do not worry," I say quick. "I, the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., am not prone to foolishness. Incidental, I have no money."

"Two-bits each for four meals," she says, figuring rapid. "One dollar even, and here you are, Hopewell."

"But," I say, "one dollar is hardly enough for a man in my position. You should add a few nickels and dimes!"

"Not one cent!" she says positive. "For you, Hopewell, money is the root of evil, and I am not running any chances when there is nobody but that fat, dim-wit Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce for you to associate with whilst I am gone. One dollar! Take it or—"

"Thank you, my dear," I say quick, and take the single smackeroo and tuck it into a pocket before she can change her mind and give me nothing. "I will miss you no little whilst you are away."

"Phooey!" she says. "You will not miss me."

I put on my hat and walk out, for one thing is likely to lead to another, and there is no telling what may happen, should I hang around and about the house, with the possibility that my wife might decide not to go visit her sister, after all.

Strolling along Polecat's one street, I of a sudden realize that it is a fine morning indeed, besides being a free man for two days, which would be fine for fishing, and then some. Thinking thusly, I resolve to ask Boo Boo for a short vacation of two days, and there is no reason why he will not say "yes," for all is quiet in Coyote County.

Coming to Nailhead Nutter's general store, who should step out the door very swishy in a fancy silk dress with a basket over one plump arm but Mrs. VanUplift herself.

"Deputy Hopewell," she says gushy, waving a glitter of gold rings under my nose, "just the dear man I am looking for!"

"Do tell?" I murmur, somewhat surprised that one like her, who is a no little society lady, would be looking for such as I.

"You are a fine, generous man," she says, smiling toothy, "and I am collecting contributions for a orphans' home and have you down for two dollars."

QUICKLY I look about for a place to hide, but there is none. Besides, she is clutching my arm very firm.

"Mrs. VanUplift," I say, "there is nothing I would like better than giving two dollars to a orphans' home, but today I am utmostly busy. Good-by, and kindly look me up tomorrow."

She lets go my arm, and I hurry on, no little relieved to know I still have my dollar safe and sound. I go into the jail and am somewhat surprised to find Boo Boo wide awake, his round, pink face filled with a expression of happy contentment, while he twiddles his fat thumbs pleasant.

"Boo Boo," I say, setting down, "my wife will be out of town today and tomorrow. I wish to go fishing."

"Deputy," he says, "there is no reason in the wide world why you cannot go fishing. Peace and quiet reigns supreme in our midst, and there is not one single thing for us to worry over. Come to think of it, Hopewell, life for us is a very rosy glow at the moment. You with your wife gone, and me with nothing to do but set in this very easy chair, with ten ringers in my pocket to assure me of three meals per day with apple pie and whipped cream. In fact, I could ask for nothing more except, perchance, greater wealth."

"My wife," I murmur, "says that money is the root of all evil."

"Nonetheless," he says, "I would be happy to risk all for a sizable pile of dinero."

The door opens, and in walks Mailman Moffett, puffing somewhat and carrying two letters in his fist.

"Sheriff," he says, "a letter come for you this mornin' with RUSH printed on it in red ink. So I kindly brought it over along with a second letter with no rush."

"Leave us have the rush letter," Boo Boo says businesslike.

Mailman Moffett hands over both letters, and Boo Boo blinks thoughtful at the one with RUSH on it.

"From Black, Blew and Brown, Attorneys at Law," he mumbles. "That is funny peculiar, and no mistake! I am not acquainted with no Black, Blew and Brown."

"Leave us have a look inside, Boo Boo," Mailman says, him being no less nosey than a hog in a mud puddle.

Boo Boo runs a fat finger beneath the flap and rips it open. Inside is a very fancy letter with a bank check clipped to it. He reads, and his eyes grow to the size of doorknobs.

"Why," he gurgles faint, "it says my Uncle Peabody Bounce has up and died, leaving me his sole heir!"

"How much did yuh inherit?" Mailman asks breathless. "Leave me see!"

Boo Boo scowls severe and sticks the letter into a drawer. "This," he says cold, "is a strictly private matter."

"Now, Boo Boo," Mailman wails, "after me bringin' this—"

"Thank yuh kindly," Boo Boo says, "and good day!"

Mailman Moffett snorts and walks out, utmostly peeved.

Boo Boo holds up the check in somewhat trembling hands.

"Deputy," he says, "although I cannot feel no deep sorrow at Uncle Peabody's passing, never having laid eyes on him, nonetheless I am considerably unnerved. This unexpected windfall is no little flabbergasting, and no mistake! Betwixt you and I and nobody else, I have fell heir to five-hundred dollars."

"Congratulations," I say sincere, "and now I will go fishing."

"Wait," he says, lifting a finger for silence. "Never before have I had five hundred ringers. In fact, I cannot realize I have it now. A check looks no more like cash money than a horse collar looks like a wagon wheel. Deputy, kindly step over to the bank with this check and bring back the money in one-dollar bills. I wish utmostly to see what five hundred dollars look like in one pile."

ALTHOUGH I do not like to be delayed thusly, I put on my hat and depart. Coming to the barber shop, I notice Chin-nick Chancey has a customer, Pop Pulley, who is a very deaf old gent doing odd jobs in summer and trapping in winter.

"Wait a moment, Hopewell," Chin-nick calls. I do so, and he comes out and says, "Hopewell, what is this baloney Mailman Moffett is spreading about Boo Boo inheriting money?"

"It is the truth," I say.

"How much money?"

"I am not at liberty to say," I reply formal, "but confidential, it is a sizable amount."

I hurry on to the bank, hand the check through the window to old man Lilly, and say, "Leave us have a stack of ones."

"Humm," he says, eyeing the check suspicious. "Where at did Boo Boo get this, and why?"

"He has fell heir to his Uncle Peabody's fortune," I reply.

"Humm," Lilly says again. "As I recall it, Peabody was a goldrusher back in the ole days. Likely died a very rich man?"

"Yes," I say, watching him close as he counts the ones into a very handsome pile, "and Boo Boo is his sole heir."

"Here is a paper bag to put the money in," Lilly says friendly. "Kindly remind Boo Boo that I have always held him in high esteem."

Who should I meet on the way back to the jail but old man Bundy, editor of the *Polecat News* and a gent very distasteful to Boo Boo and I, on account of he is always against us at election time. But now he is smiling pleasant and claps a hand familiar on my shoulder.

"Friend deputy," he says hearty, "what is this I hear about our fine sheriff inheriting wealth? And how much?"

"Mr. Bundy," I respond cold, "it is not for I to give out confidential information to one who pans us so muchly in his paper."

"Now, now, Hopewell," he says, "leave us let bygones be bygones. Incidental, I am thinking of printing a extra edition of my paper to inform the public of our sheriff's good fortune. What is in that paper bag? Groceries?"

"Money," I say and walk away, leaving him no little stunned.

WHEN I enter the jail office, Boo Boo is still setting in his chair, looking no less happy than a tomcat with a saucer of cream. He takes the money and begins to stack it up very neat on his desk.

"Deputy," he says somewhat husky, "this will make a considerable pile, and no mistake!"

"Yes, indeed," I agree, "and now that I have cashed your check, I will go fishing."

"Wait," he says, still staring at the money very happy. "Before yuh go, kindly read my second letter. Who knows, it may also contain a pleasant surprise."

While I open the letter, he begins to count his money.

"This," I say, "is from Sheriff Prize of Northfork. He says there is a gent running loose by the name of Second-Storey Sullivan, said gent being inclined to loot dresser drawers and safes. The sheriff would like us to be on the lookout for same."

Boo Boo's face has turned pasty white. "Deputy," he says hoarse, "a robber on the prowl, and me with all this wealth!"

"Here is Second-Storey's picture," I say, handing a dodger to Boo Boo, showing a picture of a bony-faced gent sporting a droopy mustache. "Now, I will get my fish pole."

"Deputy," Boo Boo says harsh, "yuh will do nothing of the kind! You will load yore shotgun and my forty-four and stand guard."

I do not like this anyway you look at it. "Return the money to the bank," I suggest hopeful.

"Indeed, no!" he says, shaking his head vigorous. "I will not trust my money to no bank, and no mistake!"

"Then lock it up in the jail safe," I say.

Twiddling his fat thumbs no little worried, he stares at the safe, and I begin to realize the truth of money being the root of evil, for it is not every day my wife is out of town.

"A gent such as Second-Storey Sullivan would have no trouble with that ole safe," Boo Boo mumbles. "No, Hopewell, there is but one answer. You must stand guard, armed to the teeth."

"But—"

"No buts!" He reaches into a pocket and pulls out a tight fold of ones. "Hopewell, here is the ten I had previous to inheriting Uncle Peabody's fortune. Put same in yore pocket as payment for guarding my lovely five-hundred and begin loading a gun."

There is a loud stamping at the door, and Boo Boo starts to hide the money in a desk drawer. But before he can do so, in walks Pop Pulley. Seeing all the money, Pop's eyes bug no little.

"So Chin-nick waren't lyin', after all," he wheezes. "He said yuh'd inherited several thousand."

"Chin-nick is loco," Boo Boo yells loud on account of Pop being deaf. "It was merely five hundred."

"Nearly five hundred thousand!" Pop says, blinking rapid. "Good gravy, Boo Boo! That's a heap of money!"

"No," Boo Boo says, "not—"

"Snow?" Pop says, scowling. "Now yuh're tryin' to change the subject. Boo Boo, I allus voted for yuh."

"Listen, yuh ole hellion!" Boo Boo roars.

"A million!" Pop cries aghast. "Good gravy!" Only this time he does not say "gravy," but something much stronger.

"Pop," Boo Boo shouts, "come closer, so's I can tell you."

"Now, looky," Pop bristles, "just because yuh're a millionaire, yuh can't swear at me!"

He hobbles through the door and slams it violent.

"Want me to catch him and explain?" I ask.

"No," Boo Boo says quick. "You stay with me and this five hundred. The more I think about having this money, the nervouser I am. Load our weapons, Deputy, and prepare to defend my wealth with yore life if need be."

I doubt that his wealth is in any great danger, but ten smackeroos for guarding him is not to be sneezed at, even if I cannot go fishing today, for there is tomorrow coming up. So I tuck the money into a pocket, load my double-barrelled shotgun; then dig Boo Boo's six from the wastebasket, him being gun-shy and hiding it there, and fill it with loads.

"Here you are," I say, holding it toward him.

HE leaps from his chair and backs away. "Hopewell," he gurgles, "never, never point either end of a gun at me! Also, you are the one hired to defend my money, so kindly keep both weapons handy."

At that moment, we hear footsteps approaching, and Boo Boo begins to stuff money into various pockets frantic.

"Aim both weapons at the door," he hisses, "and shoot to kill!"

The door opens, and in walks Nailhead Nutter, wiping his hands brisk on his flour-sack apron and smiling utmostly friendly.

"Ah, haw!" he says, eyeing Boo Boo's bulging pockets with a few-odd bills protruding here and yon. "Runnin' over with money, I see." He sets down very chummy and gives Boo Boo a cigar. "I am no little proud to have a millionaire for a friend and customer, Boo Boo. Incidental, I was on my way here to collect a matter of three dollars and thirteen cents from you for cheese and crackers to munch between meals when I met Pop Pulley, who said yuh had inherited a million from your uncle."

"Pop misunderstood," Boo Boo says feeble.

"Figured he must have," Nailhead says. "Had a idea that ole Peadbody left yuh several million instead of one. But what I wanted to say is for yuh to not worry about payin' me that measly three-thirteen. Also, come to my store any time, Boo Boo, and help yoreself to anything. I am at yore service, tooth and toe-nail!"

"Thank yuh," Boo Boo murmurs.

"Here, have another cigar. Well, I will bother yuh no longer, knowing how you millionaires are busy men. *Adios*, dear friend."

He gets to his feet, bows low and backs out the door.

Boo Boo wipes the sweat from his bald head with a shaky hand. "Deputy," he mumbles, "I have a feeling that things is somewhat out of control, so to speak. Howsomever, it is no little nice to be treated so kindly by a hard-headed business man." He is interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Deputy," he whispers, "pull back all hammers and wrap fingers about triggers!"

I do so, feeling nervous, for Boo Boo's alarm is somewhat contagious. But when our visitor walks in, I see he is no one to worry about, him being Jigger Joe Jirous, owner of the Emporium Saloon.

He holds out a soft, pink hand to Boo Boo. "Shake, my friend and bosom pal," he says.

Boo Boo does so, looking bewildered.

"Allus had a ambition to shake hands with a multi-millionaire," Jigger Joe goes on, smiling brotherly. "Leave me add, dear Boo Boo and the greatest sheriff Coyote County ever had, anything I have in bottles is at yore disposal. Incidental, yore credit is good, with the sky the limit."

"Thank you," Boo Boo says, somewhat moved, "but I am not so rich as yuh think."

"Heh, heh!" Jigger Joe cackles good-natured. "The same ole modest Boo Boo. Incidental, I notice yuh have yore deputy armed and ready to defend yuh, which is not a bad idea, for millionaires are always prey to kidnapers and such. Well, I must return to my humble abode and will look forward to quenching yore thirst in the future, Boo Boo, ole chum."

He shakes hands again with Boo Boo, bows deep and backs out.

Boo Boo stares at the door, his three chins quivering no little violent. "Kidnapers!" he says hoarse. "Deputy, I never thought of that angle before. What would happen should I be kidnaped for fifty thousand ransom, me having only five-hundred dollars to my name?"

"You," I reply, "would be a dead duck."

"Hopewell," he shudders, "something has to be did instantaneous to save me. Think, Deputy, think!"

After a few moments of deep concentration, I say cheerful, "Boo Boo, relax. Nobody but a few Polecatters know of your inheritance. Although none are to be trusted too far, they are not robbers or kidnapers. As for Second-Storey Sullivan, he does his work in the dark, and it is now broad daylight. Besides, he is likely in Northfork, it being a much wealthier town than Polecat."

SLOWLY the color returns to Boo Boo's round face, and his fat lips begin to pucker smilishly.

"Deputy," he says affectionate, "yuh are more comfort to me than a ole pair of boots in hot weather, and no mistake! Even already I am unworried enough to feel a few pangs of hunger. Kindly have a look at the sun to see what time it is."

I do so and report it is straight up noon.

"Leave us wander over to Stinky Joe's beanery," he says, "and consume a few steaks and apple pie with whipped cream."

We put on our hats and step outside. Instantaneous, numerous citizens line the sidewalk, calling pleasant greetings and tipping their hats polite. Boo Boo smiles dapper at one and all, blushing rosy at this display of friendliness.

"If I was a real millionaire, Hopewell," he says to me confidential, "I would drop numerous dollar bills in our wake. But since I have but five-hundred even and wish to keep it five-hundred even, I can give nothing but smiles and pleasant nods."

We go into Stinky Joe's place, and Stinky himself ushers us to two stools and dusts them off with a great flourish.

"Welcome, Boo Boo," he says. "You, also, Hopewell. Leave me add that I have saved two choice steaks with crusty fried potatoes, generous cuts of apple pie and a fluffy bowl of whipped cream, all of which is yourn today without cost, my dear Boo Boo. And deputy."

Boo Boo is deeply touched by this and says so.

"Thank yuh," Stinky says happy. "Incidental, when yuh make out yore will, Boo Boo, perhaps yuh'd mention me in it?"

"Glad to," Boo Boo says, his mouth watering. "Leave us start with apple pie and whipped cream whilst you are preparing the steaks. Also, we will have same for salad and dessert."

Just as Stinky Joe sets pie and cream before us, who should stagger in but Forty-rod Frye waving a newspaper very excited.

"Boo Boo," he says, "I see old Bundy has printed a paper just for you."

He lays the paper down in front of Boo Boo and I, and we read two-inch headlines, which proclaim SHERIFF OF COYOTE COUNTY INHERITS MILLIONS! There follows many paragraphs in fine print, telling how Boo Boo is a upright and honest man, a fine citizen and a great sheriff who always gets his man, and that the *Polecat News* may have differed with him on occasion, but at heart has supported him 100 per cent and more throughout many years.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, smiling from ear to ear, "this is the first time I ever fully realized what a fine gentleman I am. Whilst I eat this pie, kindly re-read ever' word to me, putting special emphasis on my good points."

"Boo Boo," I say, feeling fingers of cold creeping along my spine, "the worst has happened, I am afraid."

"Kindly explain further," he says, lifting a bite of pie.

"Previous to this, your inheritance was known only to a trusted few. Soon, all who can read, friend and foe alike, will know all!"

The bite of pie chokes him of a sudden.

"Hopewell," he sputters gaspy, "yuh mean just what?"

"I mean that from this moment forward, in the eyes of the world, you are a rich man and everybody's oyster. Come, leave us eat."

"No," he says hoarse. "There is no time for food now. We must hasten to the jail, and lock all windows and doors."

"It will take some time for the papers to be circulated," I say. "Leave us calmly fortify ourselves for whatever may come."

I get no farther, for he has grabbed me by the collar and is dragging me out the door into the street.

"We must get to our weapons, Deputy," he wheezes.

THE next thing I know, we are back in the jail office. Boo Boo's face is the color of wet putty, and there is a wild look in his protruding eyes.

"Lock all doors and windows, Deputy," he pants. "Check yore firearms. Make ready!"

"The door locks are rusted," I remind, "and the windows have no locks of any kind."

"That is so," he says, dropping down on a chair and wiping the clammy sweat from his white face. "Think of something, Hopewell."

"Leave us be calm," I soothe, "and face facts as they are. Bundy's paper will not get around very far for some hours. In the meantime, leave us saddle up and ride from town. I know of a secluded spot on Skunk Creek whereat the fish bite."

"Fish!" Boo Boo thunders, banging a fist on his desk. "When my life and wealth are at stake, you talk about fish!"

He shoves to his feet and walks about the room, agitated muchly. Presently he stops at a window and stares out. Of a sudden, he sways dizzy.

"Hopewell," he husks, "the stage has just pulled into town, leaving off two black-coated strangers looking no little dangerous!"

"Where?" I ask, hurrying to a window.

"They have went into the hotel. Already robbers and cut-throats are flocking to town. Do something, Hopewell."

"Boo Boo," I say, "you can depend on —*Humm,* there is old Chief Eagle Beak and half a dozen braves, setting in the shade of Bing-bong Beemer's blacksmith shop. Wonder what they are here for?"

"Injuns!" Boo Boo pants. "Hopewell, I recall distinct my Grandpappy Bounce telling how Injuns used to kidnap various citizens and hold them for ransom."

"I doubt if Eagle Beak would do that."

"Deputy, being a millionaire, yuh cannot trust nobody."

"But you are not a millionaire."

"That is neither here nor yon," he pants. "Hopewell, be ready."

There comes a rap at the front door very determined.

"Don't answer the door," Boo Boo hisses. "Shoot both barrels!"

"Yoo—hoo, Mr. Bounce!" a feminine voice calls trilly.

Boo Boo sinks into a chair and says mumbly, "Come in!"

The door opens, and Mrs. VanUplift swishes into the room, all smiles a yard wide and her rings a-glitter.

"I have read of your good fortune, Sheriff," she says happy. "I am collecting contributions for a orphans' home and expect ten-thousand dollars from you."

For a moment, I think Boo Boo will pass out cold. But he manages to get his breath and hold on to his chair.

"Deputy," he says husky, "kindly hand Mrs. VanUplift two dollars and ask her to return some other day for the remainder."

Astounded speechless, I dig out two dollars and put same into Mrs. VanUplift's hand, which she takes and says, "Thank you. I will come back later for the nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-eight dollars."

The moment she is gone, I say, "Boo Boo, you owe me two dollars."

He puts a fat hand into a bulging pocket; then shakes his head. "No," he says firm. "Should I give you two, I would have but four hundred and ninety-eight dollars left, not my entire lovely five hundred which Uncle Peabody left me."

A great stamping of feet across the porch causes Boo Boo to forget what he is saying.

"Hopewell," he whispers, "grab up yore weapons."

The door flies open, and who should come in but Mayor Mince-Meat Malone smiling beneath his red mustache, and Judge Jackson tapping his gold-headed cane very friendly.

"Friend Boo Boo," the mayor says, "congratulations and best wishes from the fair city of Polecat!"

"Also, the same and more of it from our political party!" the judge booms hearty. "As yuh know, Boo Boo, our party has been operating in the red for some time. Since we have been yore loyal supporters for years, we know yuh'd be happy at the privilege of shelling out a few thousand for next year's election."

VERY broad indeed is the smile which lights up the mayor's face.

"Yes, indeed," the mayor says, shaking Boo Boo's hand like he is pumping water from a deep well. "Also, we are going to build a city park and hospital, which we will call Boo Boo Park and Bounce Hospital. Here is a paper to sign which says you will donate one-hundred thousand!"

"Gents," Boo Boo says, "I only got five hundred dollars from Uncle Peabody."

"That's all right," Judge Jackson says. "You can make a small token payment now and give us the rest as soon as the estate is settled. Boo Boo, you are a man who we are proud to know."

"Deputy," Boo Boo says hoarse, "kindly give the mayor and the judge one dollar per each as a token payment and ask them to depart, for I am a busy man."

I do not like this giving out of my own pocket, but do so, for there seems nothing else to do at the moment.

As soon as they are gone, who should come but Six-Two Simmons, the undertaker, looking like he has lost all his relatives and carrying numerous glossy pictures of fancy caskets.

"Boo Boo," he says tearful, "no matter how rich a gent is, there comes a time when he must depart this world, including you. A man in yore position must be laid to rest in style, and no mistake. This custom-made casket can be had in two models. Plain gold trimmed, or studded with a few-odd diamonds and what-nots. I will give you, my friend and confederate, a handsome discount."

"Six-Two," Boo Boo bleats, "I am not in need of a casket."

"How can you be sure?" Six-Two says, shaking his head solemn. "Here today, gone tomorrow, I allus say. Leave us have a small down-payment, Boo Boo."

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, "hand Six-Two a couple ringers and show him the door. At the moment, I am in no mood to argue."

"Thank yuh," Six-Two says, taking my money grabby. "Leave me know soon if yuh want diamonds or plain gold."

He goes out, and Boo Boo twiddles his thumbs very exasperated. "I," he says, "am about to lose my mind, Hopewell, with people pestering me and strangers in town. Oh why, oh, why did Uncle Peabody have to up and die, making me his sole heir?"

Before I have time to think up a suitable answer to this, who should stagger in but Forty-Rod Frye, a cunning glitter in his eyes.

"Salutations, my dear friend Boo Boo," he says, bowing low and almost falling flat on his face. "Word has got around how yuh have give generous to worthy causes, so I have come hither to ask yuh to help in a cause I am sponsoring whole-hearted."

"Such as?" Boo Boo asks suspicious.

"A home for ole worn-out cowponies," Forty-Rod says, punctuating same with a slight hiccup.

"I," Boo Boo murmurs, "am in no mood to give to charity."

"Boo Boo," Forty-Rod says, horrified, "could it be that money has turned yore heart to stone."

"Deputy," Boo Boo says weary, "hand Forty-Rod a ringer."

"But," I protest, "it hardly seems just that I should—"

"Hopewell," Boo Boo scowls, "never leave it be said I have a heart of stone. Besides, we have no time to argue."

I hand over a dollar, and Forty-Rod leaves hasty. But no sooner does he shut the door when it opens again, letting in No-Work Norton, who smiles toothless and takes off his hat.

"Sheriff," he says, "I am going to build a home for gents such as I who find it difficult to keep body and soul together, and wish you to contribute a few-odd thousand."

"This is the last straw!" Boo Boo yells, leaping to his feet.

Swearing lusty, he grabs No-Work by the neck and the seat of the pants, carries him to the door and tosses him into the street. "Hopewell," he says, "the next person who comes for money will find a no little chilly reception!"

His voice chokes off, and the blood drains from his face. I take a look through the door, and what I see gives me goosepimples, also, for coming across the porch are two strangers wearing long black coats and eying us no little severe. "Grab our guns, Deputy!" Boo Boo hisses.

BUT before I can do this, even if I wanted to, the strangers are inside the office with their arms folded, and I realize if they are carrying sixes in shoulder holsters, I would be very foolish to reach for my shotgun.

"Peace and goodwill, Brother Bounce," the tall, skinny one says.

Boo Boo swallows audible and says nothing.

"I am Brother Botswell," the gent goes on solemn, "and this is Brother Bostrutter. We have come to Polecat to look it over, hoping to bring our flock hither."

"Flock of what?" Boo Boo asks.

"Brothers," Brother Bostrutter answers, "and their wives and numerous children."

"Oh, I see," Boo Boo says, although I doubt if he sees nothing but the brothers eying the jail safe very curious.

"Yore generosity has come to our attention," Brother Botswell goes on solemn, "so we have come hither to ask yuh to share a portion of yore great wealth with our brotherhood in order for us to make a settlement near Polecat and build a church and school."

"Yes, indeed," says Brother Bostrutter, putting a hand beneath his long black coat very suggestive.

"Gents," Boo Boo says husky, "I will be delighted!"

Brother Bostrutter's hand comes out with a handkerchief, upon which he blows his nose very exhaustive. "Hay fever," he says.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says quick, "give these brothers two dollars and leave them be on their way, pronto."

"But," Brother Botswell says, "two dollars is hardly generous."

"Kindly do not slam the door when yuh leave," Boo Boo says.

They leave, but slam the door, making Boo Boo jump, him being greatly unstrung. "Deputy," he says excited, "did yuh see what I seen?"

"Such as?" I ask.

"Put a droopy mustache on that tall skinny hombre, and he is a dead ringer for none other than Second-Storey Sullivan! Hopewell, they came here to case the joint, and no mistake!"

Three chins quivering, he stares about fearful. "Only a shotgun and a forty-four to save us, Deputy. That is not enough. Besides, I do not trust firearms, especially after dark."

He goes to a window and stares out. "Hopewell," he cries, "the sun is setting. Run about town immediate and gather up some suitable weapons for me, which do not explode bangy. In the meantime, I will begin to set numerous booby traps around and about the office."

I put on my hat and rush out, thinking sad how Uncle Peabody's bequest has become a keg of powder with a very short fuse burning. Also, I realize that out of the ten Boo Boo gave me to protect him, there is but one lonely dollar left. Besides, I am weak from hunger.

But there is no time to waste eating with darkness rushing in, so I stop at Tom-Thumb's butcher shop and borrow his meat ax; then borrow the long-bladed cheese knife from Nailhead Nutter, not even stopping to dig a cracker from the cracker barrel, and rush lastly to Bing-Bong Beemer's blacksmith shop and help myself to his sledge hammer when he is looking the other way.

The moment I step through the jail door, there comes a great crash followed by a blast of cold water down my back.

"Ah, ah!" Boo Boo exclaims, muchly pleased. "That booby trap works to perfection, and no mistake!"

Before I can recover to express a opinion of thusly being made a guinea pig of his booby trap, consisting of numerous chairs one a-top another with a pail of water above the door, he grabs the weapons from me and lines them up very handy on his desk.

"Ha!" he says. "Leave Second-Storey Sullivan come if he dares!"

I wring the water from my shirt-tail and stare at Boo Boo. Never before have I seen him like this, his chins quivering dangerous and his eyes somewhat bloodshot; and I realize that at the moment, he has the temperment of a lady grizzly with two cubs underfoot. "Come, Deputy," he says harsh, "get a move on. Leave us set a similar trap at the rear door before darkness is complete."

BY the time it is dark, we have all doors and windows barricaded with chairs, tables, bunks from the cells and numerous fire buckets filled to the brim with cold water. Exhausted no little, we drop down on chairs in the middle of the office; him with knife, ax and sledge; me with shotgun and .44. "Keep both ears open wide," Boo Boo whispers.

Time passes no little slow, but at last the night grows uncanny quiet outside as the Polecatters go home to bed. Then of a sudden just as I am dozing, there are heavy footsteps on the porch, followed by a firm knock. "There is nobody to home," Boo Boo says hoarse.

"Let me in," a voice says. "I got a telegram for yuh, Boo Boo."

"It sounds like Ticker Tanke," Boo Boo whispers to me, "but yuh never know in a case like this. Whilst I peep through the keyhole, Deputy, keep both trigger fingers in readiness."

I hear him move cautious to the door. The knocking begins again, and Ticker says impatient, "Open up, Boo Boo. Even if yuh are a millionaire, I ain't got all night!"

That is when he opens the door. There follows a crash and a yell from Boo Boo, sounding like he is drowning. I get a lantern going and find Boo Boo in the midst of his own booby trap, a fire bucket over his head, with Ticker Tanke, the depot agent, staring at him with mouth agape.

"I can't understand," he begins, "why a millionaire would wear that."

"Kindly offer no comments!" Boo Boo says, flinging the pail to one side. He grabs the telegram, shoves Ticker out the door and shuts it firm.

"Reset the trap, Deputy," he orders, "whilst I read my message."

I do so, and Boo Boo reads aloud, " 'Informed of your good fortune stop. Need you in Washington immediately stop. Want you for my private secretary stop. Bring your checkbook stop.' "

"Who's it from?" I ask. "The president?"

"No," Boo Boo says. "From Loudmouth Blout—I mean, Senator Blout. Hopewell, I have become a great man, and—oh, oh!"

"Oh, oh, what?"

"Hopewell, even Washington knows about my inheritance. It won't be no time a-tall before every owl-hooter in the U.S.A., including congressmen, will be on my trail. Put out the light and grab up yore guns!"

Just as I lift my shotgun, there comes scary sounds at the rear door and guttural voices of many men.

"Who's there?" Boo Boo bleats, putting cheese knife between his teeth and lifting sledge and meat ax.

"Me, Eagle Beak and braves," says a deep voice.

The knife slips from Boo Boo's teeth, and he collapses into a chair. "Kidnapers!" he mumbles. "This is the end, Hopewell!"

"We wantum place to sleep," Eagle Beak says. "Open door."

"It's a trick!" Boo Boo whispers. "Save me, Hopewell!"

I lift my shotgun and take aim at the door. "Deputy gottum gun!" a Injun says, peeking through a window.

There is a wild scramble of feet running down the alley.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says grateful, "yuh are a brave man, and no mistake! Blow out the lantern."

At last, gray dawn arrives, finding Boo Boo and I utmostly fagged from setting up all night.

Boo Boo stirs groany and looks at me out of baggy eyes. "Deputy," he says, "I have decided to leave town and become incognito elsewhere. Take a look out to see if the road is clear."

I do so and feel a slight chill. "Boo Boo," I report, "Chief Eagle Beak and braves are squatting in the courthouse yard about a small camp fire."

"Look in t'other direction," he says.

"Oh, oh!" I say, "The two so-called brothers are setting on the hotel veranda, staring this way."

"Trapped!" Boo Boo mutters faint. "Hopewell, I am a sadder and wiser man, and no mistake, and wish to state that being pore, such as I was previous to yesterday, is a condition of bliss which only a rich man can appreciate. If I had but one wish to wish, it would be to become untangled from the root of evil, commonly called money."

THERE comes a knock on the door, and Mailman Moffett bellows from outside, "Open up, Boo Boo. I have another rush letter for yuh. Also, one not marked."

"Come in," Boo Boo says, and Mailman does so.

There follows a great crash of chairs, a gush of water and a blast of cusswords from Mailman. "Boo Boo," he roars, "Uncle Sam will hear about this!"

Ignoring his complaint, Boo Boo takes both letters in trembling hands. He opens the rush one first, and I see his face begin to smile.

"Deputy," he cries sudden, "it is from Lawyers Black, Blew and Brown. It seems they have turned up some unexpected expenses concerning Uncle Peabody. Quote: "Do not cash our check, as it will bounce, and please return same immediately.'"

"Boo Boo," I say gasping, "you have already cashed the check."

But he is digging the one-dollar bills from pockets and stuffing them into the paper sack like a man fighting to get rid of a swarm of stinging bees.

"Take this to the bank, Hopewell," he pants, "and get our check back. On yore way, stop here and yon, showing Black, Blew and Brown's letter to one and all, explaining I am a man without a single cent. Have ole Bundy print it in his paper. In short, declaim to the wide world I am a poor man, but utmostly content, even being penniless as I am."

"But," I say feeble, "you are not quite penniless. Out of the ten you gave me, there is one left, which I feel I must return, since it was not your wealth which I guarded."

"No, Deputy," he shudders. "I do not want to look no dollar-bill in the face at the moment. Kindly keep it for yore own in payment for returning our borrowed weapons. And as a bonus, go fishing the rest of the day, for I wish utmostly to rest in peace."

Mailman and I depart in somewhat of a daze and spread the news of Boo Boo's being penniless. Last of all, I go to the bank and swap the sack of money for the check. And who should I meet when I step outside but Mrs. VanUplift.

"Hopewell," she says firm, "I wish to collect the two dollars for the orphans' home, which you promised yesterday to contribute today. And I will not take 'no' for an answer, for you have had no uncle die and leave you a fortune which has disappeared overnight, such as occured to that fat, no-good sheriff!

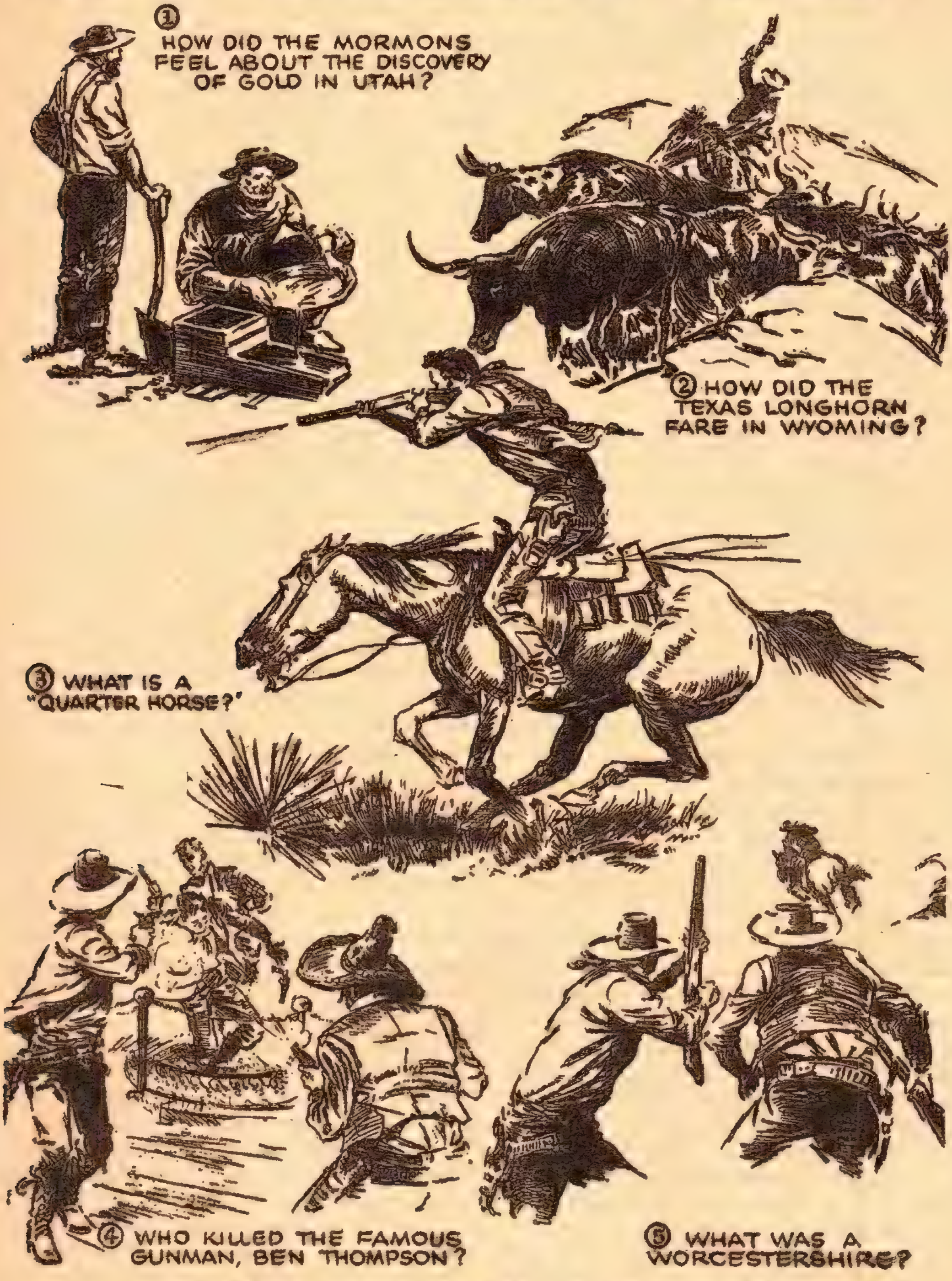
Not liking the glint in her eyes, I dig out the two ones give to me by my dear wife and Boo Boo and hand them to Mrs. VanUplift. "Thank you," she says crisp. "You, Hopewell, are a gentleman."

Before going fishing, I return to the jail office with Uncle Peabody's inheritance and find Boo Boo setting in his easy chair, fast asleep. Then I notice the second letter on his desk and see it is from Sheriff Prize, informing us he, hisself, has caught Second-Storey Sullivan, who was in Northfork all the time.

"Take it away!" Boo Boo mumbles, dreaming out loud. "I will have no million dollars cluttering up my jail!"

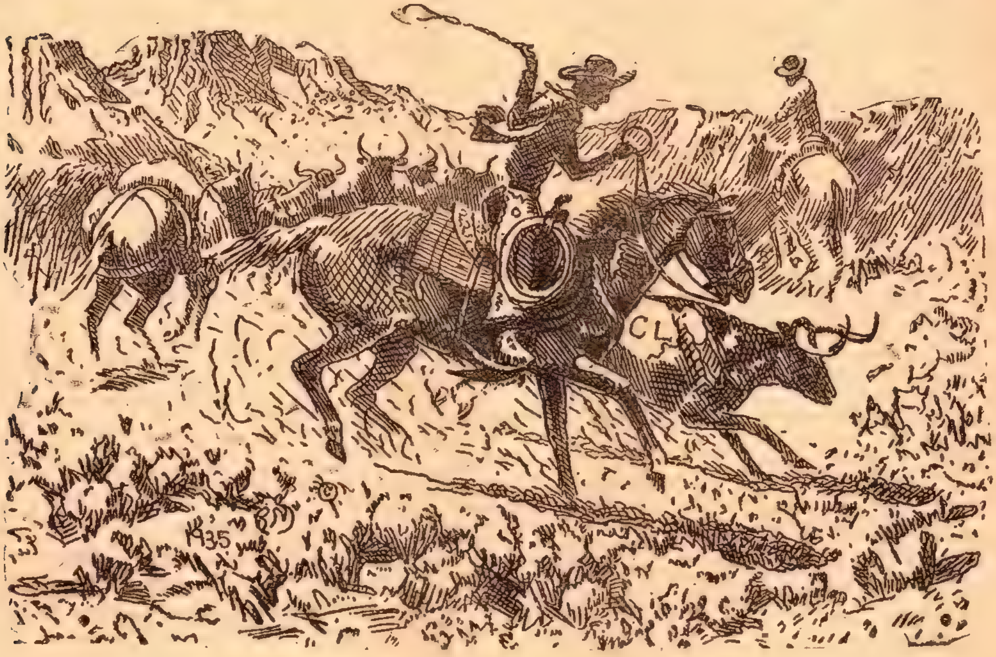
Of a sudden, weariness strikes me also, and I am too tired to go fishing. So I set down. Presently, Boo Boo begins to snore somewhat musical; and knowing all is once again peaceful and calm in Coyote County, I close my eyes to sleep, thinking how nice indeed it is to work for Boo Boo Bounce, who is lucky enough to inherit exactly nothing from his Uncle Peabody, and no mistake!

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ


① HOW DID THE MORMONS FEEL ABOUT THE DISCOVERY OF GOLD IN UTAH?
② HOW DID THE TEXAS LONGHORN FARE IN WYOMING?
③ WHAT IS A "QUARTER HORSE?"
④ WHO KILLED THE FAMOUS GUNMAN, BEN THOMPSON?
⑤ WHAT WAS A WORCESTERSHIRE?

The Answers are on Page 161 — if you must look!

A TRUE-FACT STORY OF THE PIONEER WEST



Texas longhorns almost never saw a cowboy, except on a horse

The Savage Longhorns

By SAM BRANT

STAY on your horse, cowboy!"

For years it has been an accepted legend of the range country that a man on foot was sure target for the fast and vicious attack of the longhorns. Philip Ashton Rollins tells in his book, "The Cowboy," that some ranchers fined their men if they got off their horses without good reason, within a quarter of a mile of a bunch of cattle.

Yet no less an authority than J. Frank Dobie, famous Texas historian, says this whole legend is mostly superstition, and that the vicious reputation of the longhorn was mostly undeserved.

There were occasions, of course, when a longhorn would attack a man. A mother cow would defend her calf, or a man might even run into one particular belligerent individual. But on the whole, Professor Dobie says, the longhorn's characteristic was curiosity, not viciousness.

The old longhorn was much more like a wild animal than the placid, domestic cow. And like a wild animal, it was extremely alert, watchful, active and curious. They were in fact, much

WERE THEY AS TOUGH AS THEY WERE PAINTED?

like deer, which have often been lured within firing range by hunters who traded on their curiosity

Now it is perfectly true that many of the old time cattle had never seen a man on foot. To them a man was a kind of centaur, four legs below and two arms above, usually equipped with a rope. If a man dismounted on the range, to the startled eyes of the cattle he seemed to break in half. This was a phenomenon so remarkable that they could hardly believe their eyes. And they came up pronto to investigate. If the man who saw these horns and rolling eyes closing in on him got into a panic and ran, of course they chased him as many kinds of animals will. And sometimes an accident could happen that way. But Dobie insists that if he stood his ground the cattle would stop. If he yelled the chances were that they would run like mad.

Woo-sh! Good-by, Steer!

This is a very interesting theory and will, no doubt, be hotly denied and hotly defended by cowmen of every variety. But as against the experiences of cowboys who have been chased by longhorns, there are such records as that in the journal of Frank Reaugh, famous Southwestern artist.

Every day Reaugh went out on foot with his easel and a big umbrella to protect himself from the hot sun. He never felt the slightest uneasiness. As soon as he had set up his umbrella and easel and started to work, the longhorns would come trotting in to investigate and soon would have formed a lively, curious circle around him, the strangest group of art critics in the world.

One day, he recounts, he was surrounded by the usual circle at about two hundred feet. With ears up to catch any sound, eyes alert and noses wiggling for every scent, they worked slowly forward, a step at a time.

The leader was an interesting-looking specimen, a fine big animal of wonderful color. Reaugh was painting like mad to get him on canvas when a sudden puff of wind tore his umbrella loose. It shot up into the air, then came down and began to roll on edge, like a giant hoop, straight toward the steers. They instantly stampeded in all directions—except the leader. His reputation was at stake and he set himself for the attack of this free-wheeling, horrible monster with braced feet and lowered, sharp-pointed horns.

Maybe he was depending upon his own formidable appearance to scare off any enemy. But the umbrella wasn't frightened. It came right at him, but not directly, rather with a wabbling, bouncing drunken motion that was nerve-wracking.

It was something out of a cow's nightmare—it was something this steer could not fathom. He would have fought anything human or animal, but this was too much. His nerve broke. With a bawl of terror he turned tail and fled after the others, still pursued by the errant umbrella. Whether Mr. Reaugh recovered his sunshade or not remains in doubt; the cows at any rate, never came back.

However, gentle or not, few people tried to milk a range longhorn. To cowboys, milk was something strictly out of a can. And for years the state of Montana was pointed out as the largest cattle exporting and milk importing state in the Union.

There is a story told by Clark Wissler, Indian historian, of a cowboy who took sick and was brought in to the Indian agency for the resident doctor to examine. Among the things the doctor prescribed was fresh milk.

The patient's friends were taken aback. "You mean fresh out of a can?"

"Not canned milk—fresh milk from a cow. He'll die if you don't get him some."

The cowboys held a conference, then went out and roped a cow with calf. They drove her into the corral. This did nothing to soothe her feelings and the separation from her calf made her ready to fight. So the cowboys had to throw and tie her up tightly. Then one of the boys took a tin cup and got to work.

Now any farmer knows that milking is not a one-sided proposition at all. The cow has got to cooperate. And this cow was not in a cooperative mood by any means. After struggling and cursing and fuming, the valiant milker produced about a teaspoonful of the white fluid in the bottom of the cup.

Worn out, he was replaced by another amateur milkmaid, who in turn struggled and fumed and turned the air blue with profanity. He turned in another spoonful. Then the others took their turn. And so a couple of hours of the hardest work they had ever done resulted in about four spoons of milk.

They wiped the honest sweat from their brows and considered their handicap.

"Well," said one, "if that's the best we can do, old Jim just ain't going to have no milk. And if he wants to be stubborn about it and die, he'll just have to die, that's all."

They untied the ropes and the terrified longhorn mother collected her calf and hit out for parts unknown. It is presumed that she was not so stubborn when the calf approached her.

Like any wild animal, the longhorn was really savage in defense of its young. Even the lobo wolf, the fearsome killer of the plains, thought twice about tackling a longhorn, whereas they would frequently pull down a lone buffalo. The longhorn, faster and more intelligent, could wreak terrible havoc with its long, sharp weapons and the wolves wanted no part of it. While Herefords had to be protected from wolves the longhorns were very well able to take care of themselves.

Longhorns could protect themselves from another deadly menace to cattle—the screwworm. The screwworm is the larva of the blowfly, which, attracted to cuts and open sores on the bodies of animals, lays its eggs therein. The larva which hatch out in the wound will create terrible havoc and may eventually kill the animal unless the insects are killed. Open the pages of any cattleman's magazine and you will see dozens of advertisements for salves and other medicinal preparations to kill screwworms and treat infection.

Every Cow a Doctor

But the old longhorn didn't need any such tinkering. More supple than the heavy-bodied beef cattle of today, it would reach around and lick the wound clean—lick the worms right out of it. If the worms were in some part of the longhorn's body it couldn't reach with its tongue, the cow would go into the water and stand there for hours, trying to drown the worms. Deer will do the same stunt.

It wasn't only the occasional wound which made screwworms so dangerous to cattle. When a calf was born, the blowfly was on hand to lay its eggs in the infant's navel and on the lacerated parts of the cow's body. This meant a quick and dreadful doom for every calf on the range, had not the longhorn been able to care for it by licking it free. Today the cowboy has to do this job of nursing, with a brush and pot of salve.

Little known, this ability to cope with the dreaded blowfly was one of the main reasons that ranchmen of the Southwest hated to see the old longhorn go. Scrawny, tough, agile, it was not nearly as good a beef animal as the Herefords and Shorthorns and Angus and the blends of today, the Brangus and Beefmasters and other crosses with Brahmas. But it could look out for itself.

Yet today the longhorn is extinct. It lives on in legends and sometimes those legends grow with the years.

Whether you agree with Dobie that the longhorn was an amiable, though curious animal, or with those who say he was as cunning and deadly as a lobo—without him the West would not have been what it was.

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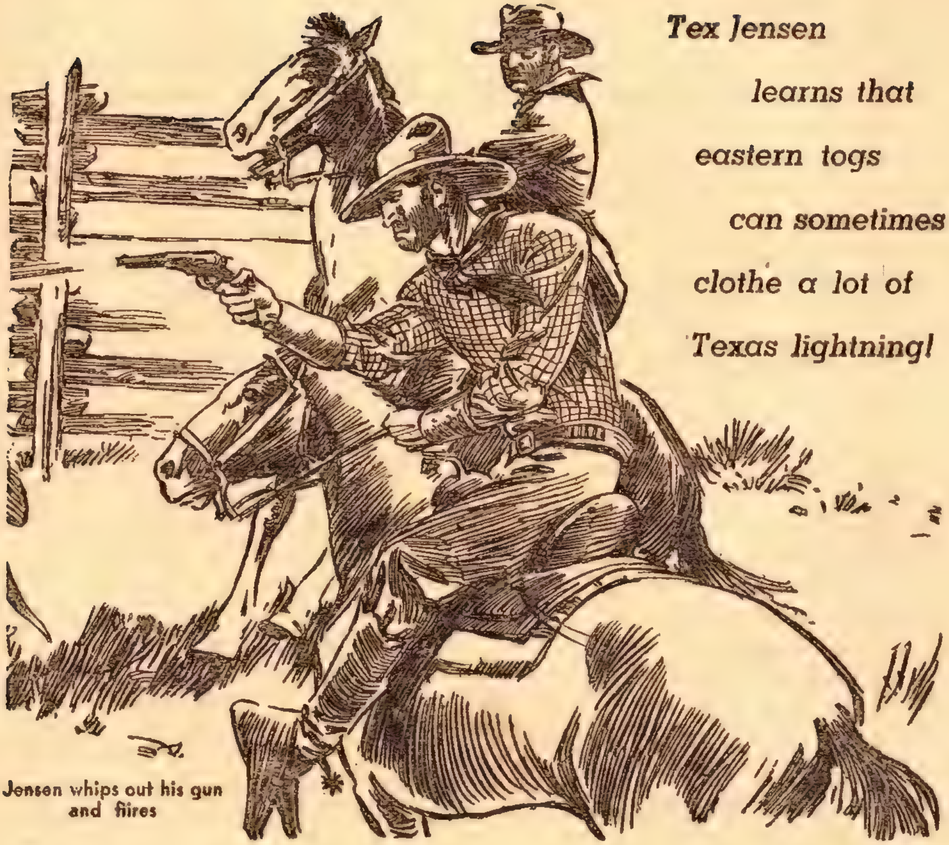
NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

NO LAW IN PASS CREEK VALLEY by Wayne D. Overholser



Jensen whips out his gun and fiires

Tex Jensen learns that eastern togs can sometimes clothe a lot of Texas lightning!

The Pilgrim

By CLAY STARR

THE CROSS 40 is only one of the many cattle outfits making a gather at the forks of the Rio Hondo. A dozen other spreads have sent their reps to work for their own brands, which means that every cow-critter will be rounded up and held on bed-ground, and then cut out into smaller shipping herds by the cowboys making the big fall gather.

As one of the oldest members of the Cross 40 crew, I'm jingling the cavvy about sundown, waiting for the coosa to yell: "Come and get it!" Looking out toward the skyline, I see something I can't noways believe. A weary Pilgrim has just topped the far rise, and is making his way toward the fire—*on foot!*

The critters in the saddle-band see this stranger at the same time, and every one of those horses is spooky. A man on foot in unfenced cattle-country is something to behold, and this one was even more so.

Aside from the cowboys riding herd on the holding ground, the other boys are waiting for their grub. They're all squinting at this tenderfoot, and shaking their heads. One or two rub their eyes and look again. He's still there, but now he's hitting a high lope on shank's mare.

As the stranger gets closer to the roundup camp, I see he's young and well set up. He's wearing a polka dot shirt hanging outside his britches which are tore at the kneees, with the legs tucked down into pee-wee boots. And I'm a Gentle Annie if those boots ain't laced, and they're the flat-heeled kind. He's shy on head-gear, but he packs a six-shooter belted high in a spanking new cartridge belt. I figure he must be left-handed, on account of he wears his hardware on the left side with the handle reversed.

Jim Deere is bossing the wagon, and Jim is fifty-odd. He rubs his old Stetson to the back of his grizzled head as he reads this Pilgrim's brands and earmarkings out loud.

"About twenty-three, nigh onto six foot, a hundred and sixty pounds on the lean side, and fast as greased lightning with his cutter!"

"What makes you think he's rapid with his six-shooter?" Tex Jensen asks. Tex fancies himself as a gun-swift, and he can call his shots.

"That there holster is moulded by hand," the ramrod explains. "The hogleg is pitched out for a fast cross-draw, and it's a Colt thirty-eight on a forty-five frame. This wandering splinter is a gun-swift, but he don't seem to know cows or saddle-stock. Leave me talk to him."

AS THE Pilgrim approaches the chuck-wagon, he's looking the crowd over. He's grinning like he was some ashamed, but he picks out Jim Deere as the Big Wheel.

"Water," he croaks with a frog in his throat. "After I eat, I'll tell you about myself."

Jim waves to the barrel lashed on the wagon, and the Pilgrim drinks copious. He glances at Jim, turns his head to look a question at old Coosa Withers who's rodding the chuck-wagon, and the old cook ladles out a heaping plate of hot beef stew.

"If you're riding the grub-line, you can do the honors after you've ironed the wrinkles out of your belly," Coosa growls. "Which means you can wrangle the crocks in the wreck-pan."

The stranger nods and accepts the tin plate of chuck. All hands watch to see if he is going to set his plate down on the tail-gate table, an unforgiveable sin in any cow-camp. The Pilgrim sets down cross-legged like an old-timer, and begins to eat like a wolf. He licks up that plate of beef stew and kind of gestures with the plate toward old Coosa, who fills it up again.

"Eat all you take," Coosa warns. "There's plenty for eating, but not a drop for waste!"

"Thanks," the stranger murmurs, and some of the rasp has left his throat. "Best grub I ever ate in my life!"

"It will build you up where you're all tore down," Coosa growls, but it's plain he is pleased at the stranger's compliment. "Save room for a slab of dried-apple pie. You stick around the Cross Forty wagon a spell, I'll put some tallow on your short ribs. What are the rest of you rannihans waiting for?"

The crew begins to eat with the appetites of out-door men. The stranger finishes his stew, takes a hunk of salt-rising bread, wipes the plate clean after mopping up the sop, and grins at old Coosa as he holds out his plate for the promised pie. And you can cut my cinchas if Coosa didn't give him a double-sized wedge.

Jim Deere has been watching the stranger without letting on he's looking. The rest of the crew are watching like cowhands do, from the far corners of their eyes. Finally Jim asks a question. "Where at's your pony, Pilgrim?"

"The name is Francis C. Fordyce," the stranger introduced himself. "From upper New York State originally. My horse threw me off, early this afternoon."

"What you mean, he throwed you?" Jim asks bluntly. "Don't you know that most any cow-critter is likely to hook a man on foot out here?"

"I know it now," Fordyce admits with

a shamed grin. "That's how come I'm busted out at the knees. A big rangy steer horned me back aways."

"There's a law against shooting range cattle except for meat," Tex Jensen speaks up, and he's staring at the Pilgrim's six-shooter.

"Self-preservation is the first law for survival," Fordyce answered quickly. He turned to Jim Deere and spoke earnestly: "It was a Cross Forty steer. I'll pay for it out of my first month's wages."

Jim scratched his stubbled jaw and stared at the stranger. "Uh-uh," he said shortly. "A feller has got to be able to sit a horse to make a hand on the Cross Forty, and you ain't rightly dressed for the work."

The stranger turned his head, and the light fades from his bright blue eyes. He's a stranger in a strange land, something like the Prodigal Son, and after being hopelessly lost, he's found civilization again.

"I caught the horse," he says, almost in a whisper. "But I had to shoot him on account of a broken leg where he stepped into this gopher hole."

"You mean a dog-hole," Jim Deere corrected. "Whyn't you say so?"

"He ain't no rider," Tex Jensen interrupts, and he spits in the fire. "Not with them flat-heeled boots, and him bare-headed."

"He's kind of pale too," Jud Watkins horns in. "What you might call a sun-dodger."

THE stranger hangs his head and makes no answer. Saddle-tramps are plentiful in south Texas, but most of them are well-mounted. After a while the Pilgrim gets up and walks over to the chuck-wagon. He gets the wreck-pan full of dirty dishes, fills it with hot water, and begins to scrub the crocks.

Coosa Withers watches while the crew roll cigarettes and smoke. Fordyce washes and wipes the dishes, cleans up the pots, and hangs the flour-sack on the spokes of a rear wheel. Then he picks up an ax and starts to cut up a deadfall for firewood.

"Look, boss," Coosa whispers to Jim Deere. "I could do with some help on this roundup. How about leaving the Pilgrim help me with my chores?"

Fordyce lets on like he hadn't heard. He swings the ax expertly, and even throws fresh chunks on the fire. Jim Deere rubs his stubble and frowns sternly.

"He'd maybe so earn his keep," Jim growls. "But I don't know what old man Charley Cross would say when we rolled into the home spread."

"We're short a man," Coosa speaks up again. "Since Tom Brace broke his off leg when his horse stepped into a dog-hole, and it pitch black of a night. He could use Tom's soogans, and Tom's boots would fit the Pilgrim. I got an extra old J.B. he can use until he gets a new hat of his own!"

"That's all he's fit for," Tex Jensen said carelessly, but loud enough for the Pilgrim to hear him. "Pearl-diving for Coosa, and wrangling wood for the fire. He ain't no cowhand!"

Coosa turned wrathfully on Tex and dropped a hand to the six-shooter under his flour-sack apron. "You better rope out your night horse and get out there to the herd and do the work you get paid to do, Tex," he answered sharply. "What you say, boss?" he appealed again to Jim Deere.

"You're the boss of the chuck-wagon," Jim growled. "If you need help, you get that same. Tell your helper I'll put him on the payroll at twenty dollars a month and grub!"

Fordyce turned then, and bowed slightly. He seemed like a man who has just had a heavy load lifted from his shoulders.

"Thanks, boss," he said humbly. "I'll try to earn my pay. Anything else you want done, Coosa?" he asks the old cook.

"Shucks, no!" Coosa blurted. "You must have walked all of fifteen miles this afternoon. You better hit your soogans and make up your sleep. It don't take long to spend the night in this cow-camp, on account of we start work before sunrise!"

Coosa hobbles over to the hoodlum

wagon and throws down a bed-roll wrapped in a tarpaulin. Jim Deere was giving orders to the night crew, and Coosa tells Fordyce to spread his bed under the chuck-wagon.

"You never know when the herd might spook, or some wild-eyed buckaroo throw sand all over the fire sliding his bronc," he tells Fordyce. "Can you sure enough ride a jughead?" he asks curiously.

"I've rode some," Fordyce answers hesitantly. "Thanking you for siding me with the ramrod, Coosa."

"Forget it," Coosa growls. "Was you to ask me, I'd say you've missed a heap of meals lately. "You want to step about fast and talk soft around Tex Jensen," he warns in a low voice. "Tex is fixing to pick on you the first good chance he gets."

"I was a stranger and you took me in," Fordyce answers quietly. "I've already warned Jensen that self-preservation is the first law of nature!"

He crawled into his borrowed blankets and pulled them up to his chin. Coosa Withers stared at the bedroll with speculative eyes. Within two minutes the Pilgrim was sound asleep, and the old cook slowly shook his head.

"I wonder," he whispered to himself. "He don't lack for sand, but he didn't pack his riding-gear in on his back. Well, it ain't no skin off my nethers!"

COOSA WITHERS crawled from his bed-roll and stared at the crackling fire. The sun was two hours away from rising in the east, and a generous sprinkling of twinkling stars dotted a black sky over the sleeping herd.

The Pilgrim was setting out pots and skillets, and heating water for the coffee and mush. He had also made himself a half-gallon of pan coffee, and he carried a tin cup of the scalding fluid to the old cook.

"Morning, Coosie," he greeted. "Don't even answer until you've thawed out your innards."

Coosa Withers accepted the coffee and quaffed it gratefully. Then he eyed the tail-gate table suspiciously with a look of hostility in his gray eyes. He was getting on in years, and he didn't want some Johnny-come-lately messing with his cooking, and maybe so putting in a wedge for his job.

Fordyce heaped seasoned chunks on the fire, making very little noise. Raucous snores came from the sleepers in their soogans. The only sounds of activity came from the night-hawk who had just brought in the remuda of saddle-stock. The Pilgrim walked briskly across the camp clearing to put up the single rope-gate after the old jingler had wrangled his horses into the roped-off area.

Coosa stamped into his boots after putting on his weathered Stetson. He had set out dried peaches to soak, and now he sifted flour for the usual flapjacks. Nothing had been disturbed, and the old cook watched the Pilgrim from under bushy brows.

"Coosa," Fordyce addressed the cook hesitantly. "You reckon old Tom, the jingler, would lend me a horse so I could lope out and pick up my riding gear?"

"I don't mess with his saddle-stock, and he leaves my cooking alone," Coosa muttered, and then he thawed some. "Ask him after breakfast," he suggested. "And thanks for starting the fire and setting the water on to boil."

From where I'm sitting my night horse near the rope corral, I see the Pilgrim's face change some. I figure he ain't much of a shakes as a rider, and wanted to high-tail out for his saddle before the crew roused up off bed-ground. I'm about to offer him a fairly gentle bronc when Jim Deere crawls out of his blankets. When old Jim is on his feet, he's roundup boss.

Jim puts on his hat first and then stamps into his foot-gear. Now the ramrod is fully dressed, but he'll be touchy as a she-bear with cubs until he's had a quart of cowboy Arbuckle which old Coosa hands him without speaking.

Jim sups slow and sighs with content. Then he sees the Pilgrim stacking firewood, and Jim watches without letting on to look. Fordyce is wearing his borrowed boots and Coosa's extra old J.B.

Stetson, and he looks like a different man. He's found a pair of old Levi's in Tom Brace's bedroll, but he's still wearing that God-awful polka-dot shirt.

"Morning, boss," the Pilgrim says respectfully, without looking at old Jim.

"Morning," Deere growls. "After I give day orders to the working hands, you better get Tom to rope you out a horse and ride out after your gear. And don't let me catch you on foot again!"

"Like you said, boss," the Pilgrim murmurs, and it's plain to see he knows the rod has been listening from his blankets.

I cast an eye over the cavvy to find a cayuse that maybe the Pilgrim can make out to ride. Fordyce drifts over to the rope corral and grins up at me. What he says tells me he's been in a cow-camp before, on beef roundup.

"Give me one of Brace's string," he says, careless like.

EVERY man in the crew has a string of six horses, and none of them are wishful to have some other waddy using what they have drawn. By taking a hoss from the string of Tom Brace who's in hospital, the Pilgrim knows he will avoid trouble.

"Look, feller," I tells the Pilgrim. "Tom Brace was the best first-string peeler in the Cross Forty crew. He picked his own broncs, and every one of them fuzztails has a kink in his back on a frosty morning!"

The Pilgrim sighs and then squares back his shoulders. "I've got to get my gear," he murmurs. "I packed it just so far, but it's out there about seven-eight miles."

The crew is crawling out of their soogans and stomping into their boots. They won't be fit to live with until after they've had their grub. Fordyce wanders back to the chuck-wagon and begins to ax a deadfall, and I know he's trying to keep out of the way.

"Pour some black-strap into them pitchers," Coosa tells him. "Fill the cups with java, and pay no mind to that salty bunch of hairpins. This here ain't upper New York State!"

The Pilgrim fills the pitchers with thick syrup for the flapjacks, and pours coffee from the big pot. He stays close to the growler, which any cowhand knows is the chuck-wagon.

Tex Jensen glares at the Pilgrim as he takes his plate and cup from the tailgate. Fordyce lowers his eyes and pushes the sugar can forward without speaking.

"Put two spoonsful in my cup!" Jensen orders with a sneer.

The Pilgrim does like he's told, and Jensen moves away. He knows he will find plenty of grief if he holds up the other cowboys, and it ain't long until all hands are busy with their grub. A cowhand don't do much talking when he's stoking his innards, and I see the Pilgrim getting on the outside of a heaping stack of flannel cakes.

He knows he's safe for a spell, because the crew will ride out to comb the draws for strays. Fordyce will be rassling the pots for old Coosa, and he won't have many spectators when he tries to crawl what I'm going to rope out for him to ride.

The Pilgrim ties on a flour-sack apron and piles into his chores. He polishes and stacks the tin-ware neat, cleans up the skillets, and tidies up the camp. Old Coosa acts like a contented cat with one lone kitten while his swamper lightens the old cook's work. Then I get a bright idea when the Pilgrim takes off his apron and hangs it on the spokes of a wheel.

"Better take this bronc I've been straddling," I tells him. "He ain't done no work to speak of, and I've snapped the rough out of him already."

The Pilgrim looks grateful and nods his head as I climb down and hand him the whangs. Me and Coosa are watching close as he takes those split reins, turns his back with it to the head of the bronc, and steps across my old hen-skin.

"He's rode some before," I whisper to Coosa. "I wonder how come him to be so pale?"

"His business, and none of ours," Coosa growls. "Wouldn't you know it?

Yonder comes Tex Jensen for a change of horses!"

Jensen rides up with his horse limping just as the Pilgrim settles his boots in the oxbows. Jensen claws for his six-gun and blasts a roaring shot under the belly of the Pilgrim's horse. Right then things begin to happen.

The bronc swallowed his head and scraped sky with its hind heels. The Pilgrim grabs the saddle-horn and chokes that old apple for dear life. Daylight shows between the saddle and the seat of his britches, and then the horse takes out for the wide open spaces at a dead run.

Coosa faces Jensen with his old six-shooter cradled in his fist as the Pilgrim disappears in the near distance, him a bobbing and a jerking like a sack of spuds.

"Blast you, Tex!" Coosa bellows. "That feller has been turning inside out to get along with folks, and you better quit crowding him. You want to make smoke, what's holding you back now?"

"Lay your hackles, Coosa," Jensen answers respectful. "I was maybe a mite fast with my hoorawing of that dude. I just wanted to see could he sit a bucker without joining the bird gang."

"Which same the Pilgrim done," Coosa growls, and holsters his old forty-four. "Give that feller time, and he'll make a right good hand!"

IT'S maybe three hours later when the Pilgrim comes riding in with his gear in a gunny sack. He thanks me as he off-saddles and turns the roan in with the cavvy. He don't say anything about Tex Jensen, and Coosa sighs as Fordyce picks up the ax and starts in to chopping wood for the fire.

I've already crawled into my soogans, and the Pilgrim hastily finishes his work. A night-hawk don't get any too much sleep on roundup. A cowboy makes up his sleep come winter, and he eats every time he's called for chuck.

Roundup is about over, and the Pilgrim has been with the outfit about ten days. The crew is sitting around the fire after supper, telling windies and smoking brown-paper quirlies. All eyes watch old man Jim Deere as he shakes out a blanket and spreads it down close to the blaze.

"Like always, we aim to have a pitching show when the gather is done," Jim remarks casual. "Every man who rides will ante ten bucks for a jackpot, winner take all. Side bets among yourselves, and I'm shelling out a month's pay to each man. Coosa, old Tom the night-hawk, and me will be the judges. That suit you buckaroos?"

"Right down to the last notch in your fender, rod," big Joe Sweeney spoke up. "With Tom Brace in the hospital, I mean to take that dinero away from Tex Jensen this year!"

"Fifty says I beat you," Jensen answers fast. "I can fit a ride on any jughead in the cavvy, and scratch him till he quits!"

"Put it in the pot, and I'll call you," Sweeney tells Jensen. "The rest of you bronc-stampers want to get your feet wet?"

Every man shells out ten dollars and throws it on the blanket. Jensen has been letting up on Fordyce since old Coosa called his hand, but now Tex reaches out and jerks the Pilgrim by an arm.

"Are you any different?" he asks sharply. "Are you a man or a mouse?"

Fordyce hangs his head and looks distressed. Old Coosa reaches to his hip pocket and brings out his money bag. It's round and gathered with a puckering string, and all eyes watch the old cook, including the ramrod.

"I'll ante for the Pilgrim," Coosa states savagely. "And I'll kick in with another fifty to sweeten the kitty. I'd like to see him give you salty hairpins the business, and don't forget, she's winner take all!"

"Drag your money back, Coosa," Sweeney says softly. "It ain't noways fair and square. The Pilgrim don't lack for sand, but he ain't rightly what you'd call a rough-tough cowboy!"

"Leave it ride, and I'll pay you back, Coosa," Fordyce almost whispers. "A man can't die but one time!"

Coosa turned savagely on Tex Jensen. "Is he man or mouse?" he demanded.

"He'll be cat-bait after we pick up the pieces," Jensen sneered.

Fordyce made no reply. He left the group, crawled into his bed-roll under the growler, and the rest of the crew finished their smokes and hunted their beds.

Jim Deere counted the money and chuckled as he spoke to the old cook. "Two hundred and forty dollars in entry fees, with another hundred and fifty in bets. That makes three hundred and ninety cart-wheels for the best peeler in camp. One of these days they'll be putting on these pitching shows all over the West, and charging money for the folks to watch!"

RODEO means Roundup, or the place where cattle are gathered, like any cow feller can tell you. The big gather was finished, and the reps for the different outfits had cut out and bunched their own shippers. Steers were bringing thirty dollars a head at the rails; the she-stuff and yearlings had been turned out on the graze.

The saddle-stock had been culled for twisters which I was holding in a small rope corral for the peelers. The rest of the remuda had been turned out to feed, leaving twenty head of the best buckers for the pitching contest to decide who was tophand of that particular cow-camp.

Only eight men were going to ride, and they had already drawn their horses out of old Jim's Stetson. That is, slips of paper with the names of the horses written on them. The arena would be the wide-open prairie, and the time limit would be until the horse had had enough fight, or had thrown his rider.

I'm sitting with old Coosa near a snubbing post the boys had buried four feet in the ground for the event. Each man was allowed one helper to rope either head or heels, and to stretch out a hind leg until the hull was bolted into place on the hurricane deck of a bronc.

Tod Hunter of the Bar B had drawn first ride, and every one knew that Tod was only riding to get his ten dollars' worth. He bucked off on the third jump when his horse swapped ends, and Sol Bernstein of the Wagon Wheel wasn't any different.

Big Joe Sweeney rode up to the rope corral and built a small loop in his riata. He snared a flea-bitten sorrel with rolling eyes, led it to the snubbing post, and took a turn around the log.

Sweeney was a long-legged puncher who'd fight with you till hell froze over, and then skate on the ice. He jumped his saddle on the sorrel, jerked the jumper-blind loose, raked with both spurs, and let out a Texas yell.

"Yahoo! Leave him come apart and break in two!"

The sorrel accepted the challenge and settled down to work. He sun-fished and fence-cornered, squalling with every jump. Sweeney fed him the steel and fanned the laid-back ears with his hat, and the sorrel started to run. The crowd split to let the bucker through. The sorrel slid to a stop and whirled like a cat as his head went down between knobby knees.

Big Joe Sweeney lost his money when he grabbed at the nubbin just before he sailed out over the sorrel's head and landed on the bunch grass in an attitude of prayer.

"Amen!" Tex Jensen yelled. "Thanks to you boys for the collection. Now watch me work that calico horse over!"

He rode to the bars and roped a paint gelding which had been in the string of Joe Brace. Jensen bolted his kak in place on the twitching back, jumped the saddle, and shot his spurred boots down into the wooden stirrups. Then he was riding straight up and scratching with both feet, and yelling to tell it scarey.

"They never was a horse what couldn't be rode!" he boasted.

"That ain't the way it winds up," Coosa growls, as we watch Jensen work at his trade. "They never was a cowboy who couldn't be throwed," he concluded.

The calico began firing, leaping high and shaking its back like a cat. The paint thundered down on bunched hoofs to jar Jensen's spine, but the buckaroo kept his leg-lock and pedaled with both feet. The bucker jumped high and threw his left side over to sun his belly, with all four feet in the air.

Tex Jensen churned with his spurs while he yelled like a Comanche brave on the war-path. The calico came down all sprawled out, bunched its flanks and reared high. When Jensen loosened just a bit in case the bucker pinwheeled over backwards, old Paint thudded down and buckled the left foreleg.

Tex Jensen left the saddle like an arrow from a bow, turned over twice in mid-air, and thudded down flat on his back. He didn't get up for a time, and no one offered him a hand. Jensen wasn't popular with the roundup crew, and he picked himself up with a muttered curse.

Two more cowboys tried their luck, and Lonnie Struthers rode out a fair-to-middlin' bronc which bucked two minutes and then quit. Old Coosa turned to the Pilgrim who had been watching with silent interest.

"You've got three minutes to beat, Pilgrim," Coosa says careless-like. "Old Jim will help you with your ropin' and saddlin'."

JIM DEERE rode up to the rope corral and made an underhanded cast to snare a blue roan. Jensen nudged Sweeney with an elbow, and the big cowboy scowled.

"It's murder," Sweeney muttered. "Let's leave him draw out his ante."

"No," Jensen answered with a short laugh. "This is going to be something to write home about!"

I'm watching the Pilgrim, and I like what I see. He stretched out a hind leg of a roan and hands the string to the old man. Jim Deere takes a dally and sits his horse while Fordyce tightened his cinchas. Then like he did that first day when I'd lent him my night horse, the Pilgrim turns his back to the bronc's head, fitted his left boot to the oxbow, and swung up and over.

Most of the new has wore off the Pilgrim in the two weeks he's been swamping for Coosa. He's sitting that blue roan with a supple back, and he's got both hooks in the shoulders as he jerks off the jumper-blind. The roan squalls and swallows its head, scraping sky with his heels.

Jensen's mouth drops open as the Pilgrim starts in to spur-whip that fighting blue devil. The roan squalls and starts chasing his tail. He whips out of the turn and bends a knee, but the Pilgrim is riding slick and kicking with both feet.

Tex Jensen comes out with his six-shooter and blasts a pair of shots under the blue roan's middle. The roan really comes apart then, rears high, thuds down, and almost rolls tail over head.

The Pilgrim is riding like a veteran, but he's lost his borrowed hat. He takes all the roan has to offer, and then throws the bronc's head away. That is, he turns loose the bridle reins and rides by balance alone.

"Four minutes!" old Coosa yells. "Ride him cowboy!"

The Pilgrim grins for the first time. He scratches with both spurs, rides out a flurry of sun-fishing and then the roan spraddles its legs and hangs its head to acknowledge defeat. The Pilgrim tries to stir him up with a rowel, but the roan has had enough fight. Fordyce dismounts and pulls his latigo to strip his gear.

Jim Deere talks a minute with Coosa and me, and then walks over to the Pilgrim. He hands Fordyce a bag of money, and offers his right hand.

"I don't know where you learned to ride the first rough string, and I'm not asking," old Jim says soberly. "But there's a job on the Cross Forty if you want to sign on at tophand pay!"

"Well, thanks, boss," the Pilgrim says quietly. "I owe you thirty for that Cross Forty steer I shot, and I owe old Coosa sixty for my ante and side bet."

"You'll stay on to make a hand?" old Jim asks hopefully.

The Pilgrim shakes his head. "There's a feller I've got to see over the hill," he answers evasively. "Can I buy a horse for say, forty dollars?"

"Take your druthers," Jim agrees heartily. "And any time you want a job in the breaking tank, look me up on the Cross Forty."

"I'll take the blue roan," the Pilgrim tells old Jim. "He's got bottom and staying qualities."

He tightens his cinchas again, and ground-ties the roan with trailing whangs near the hoodlum wagon. Coosa nudges me when Tex Jensen strolls careless over to the Pilgrim.

"You going somewhere?" Jensen asks.

The Pilgrim looks at Jensen and frowns slightly. He's belted his six-shooter on again, and he answers Jensen short.

"Yeah, I got a message."

"Wouldn't be blanket sign, would it?" Jensen asks, his voice purring. "I see that smoke signal last night; it said the law was only two sleeps away!"

The Pilgrim jerked up his head, and his nostrils are flaring wide. "Don't prod me, Jensen," he warned.

"Kind of pale and peaked when you hoofed it in here," Jensen goaded the Pilgrim. "Like maybe you'd spent some time in the calabozo. Looks like you don't want to go back, and I'm holding you for the law!"

USUALLY there ain't much paw and beller to a cowboy, but Jensen was different. He slaps for his cutter as he steps back and swings sideways to thin the target he made. The Pilgrim's right hand slashed across his lean belly in a move too fast for the human eye to follow. Out snakes that long-barreled .38 on the .45 frame, with orange flame shouting from the muzzle just as Tex Jensen clears leather with his own cutter.

Jensen went down nearly as hard as when he was dumped from the sorrel, and he's got a slug in the right shoulder. The six-shooter pin-wheeled unfired from his hand, and no one horns into the play.

The Pilgrim is crouching behind his smoking gun with the hammer eared back for a follow-up. Jensen moans and stays down, and now he's sick from bullet shock.

Fordyce starts to back toward his horse. He stops sudden at the hoodlum wagon when a tall man with white hair, and a star on his vest, allows the Pilgrim to back into his drawn gun.

For a time it looks like the Pilgrim is going to crowd his luck. Then he shrugs and pouches his smoke-grimed six-shooter.

"You win, Sheriff," he says slowly. "I heard you was coming, but I didn't start soon enough."

"Where were you going?" the old sheriff asked curiously.

"Don't hooraw a hand, Sheriff Hansen," the Pilgrim pleaded. "Back to the jail, where I broke out less than three weeks ago!"

Sheriff Hansen smiled and holstered his six-shooter. "That was me who sent up that blanket sign," he admitted. "I knew you could read smoke, so I sent that message with my blanket over a smoky fire. I wanted to talk to you."

"I never stole that horse, Sheriff," Fordyce said earnestly. "I was riding the first rough string from the XIT spread, and I bought that running-horse for fifty dollars cash!"

"Don't I know it?" the sheriff snapped. "But you failed to get a bill of sale. We caught a feller riding that same horse the day you broke out of the calabozo. Feller by the name of Bill Jensen, and he claims to have a brother working out here on the Cross Forty roundup crew. I want to talk some of him. You're as free as the air, Pilgrim!"

He shook hands with Fordyce and grinned at old Jim Deering. "Better sign him up, Jim," he suggested. "He's the best doggone bronc peeler in south Texas!"

"You've hired a man, boss," Pilgrim tells Deere. "Put me down on the payroll as Larry Pilgrim. I just taken that Fordyce name the same time I stole that dude rigging I had on when I hit camp!"

"Well, I'm a Gentle Annie," old Coosa whispers. "But I still claim I can read sign with the best. I knew all along he was a Pilgrim!"

A Book Bargain ROUNDUP

by TEX MUMFORD

IN CASE you folks haven't noticed it, there's been a major boom in westerns the last few months. Everybody's reading, writing, or talking westerns. Which only goes to prove what we've always said: there's no finer light reading in the world than a good western story. It's got to be good though, and that's where your old pal Mumford comes in. We cull the herd and ship the rejects back to the corrals. All you get reviewed here are the books we liked well enough to recommend. And we're confident you're getting a real bargain for your two bits when you buy any one of the titles below, now available in 25c reprint editions.

DRYGULCH TRAIL by William MacLeod Raine

Curt Sanger wanted no trouble with the powerful Diamond K ranch. Nor did he care to make an enemy of Bert Savage, the brutal Diamond K boss. Such a feud could only bring him grief. He was on the sidelines when the Diamond K punchers ran amok and started to lynch a would-be killer. He might have stayed on the sidelines though lynching was not a thing he cared to see, had it not been for the girl. He was in love with Effie Collins and her scornful question to him, "Are you in this, too?" hurt.

It hurt so badly that it transformed him from an unwilling bystander into an active participant—and drove him headlong into the fight to rescue the victim from his lynchers.

It also did what he had feared—it made an unrelenting enemy of Bert Savage. For Savage had reason and method behind such unlawful acts as lynching. He wanted all of the Powder Horn country for himself, wanted to smash any opposition that raised its head so that he could rule it undisturbed. He also wanted Effie Collins.

The opposition to Savage rallied around Curt Sanger. Captain Winters, mayor of Powder Horn, made Sanger town marshal and now he was committed to fight the Diamond K to the last gasp.

The result was open, savage, smashing warfare. The prize was a cattle empire and a beautiful girl—for the winner. The loser got his usual share: six feet of earth.

A story with all the magic of Raine's superb craftsmanship.

◆

THE LONE RIDER by Jackson Gregory

A man on a undercover job has got to keep his mind on business and not go off on strange tangents, if he wants to keep his scalp. At least so felt Rogue Haverill, who had come to Lucky Town on a special mission.

He was sitting by his campfire, thinking about his own problems when the girl rushed out of the darkness. "Help me!" she cried, "they're after me!"

Rouge caught and steadied her. "Who's after you?" he asked. But there wasn't time to explain. The thunder of pursuing hoofs was growing loud on the girl's trail. Rogue had to decide instantly whether he was going to protect this girl or throw her to the wolves. He decided to protect her, though it was more than merely taking her on faith. If he took on her fight and got into something that was none of his business it might wreck his own plans. Yet there wasn't much else he could do.

It was only long after he had spirited her away to a safe place that he learned what the pursuers had wanted of her. She was wanted for murder!

Rogue Haverill had learned to look beneath the obvious aspects of a situation. The mere fact that the girl was wanted for murder did not make her a murderer. But if he were going to help her he would have to find out who she was and this was an answer that was not easily forthcoming. It was an answer won in the smoke of blazing guns and bound up with it was the startling discovery that she was linked to his own secret mission.

Jackson Gregory writes one of the most colorful stories of any western author.

◆

PAINTED PONIES by Alan LeMay

Ben Morgan killed a man. It was self-defense, for Lew Cade had brought the fight to him. And any reasonable group of men would have seen it that way. But Abner Cade, brother of the dead man, wasn't disposed toward being reasonable. Good or bad, Lew was his brother and Abner went mad with the kill-crazy lust for revenge.

He posted a $10,000 reward for Ben Morgan, dead or alive, preferably dead. That much money was more than the gun-hung rannies of Roaring River had ever seen within their grasp and it loosed a horde of bloodthirsty pursuers on Ben Morgan's trail.

Overnight, Morgan was a hunted thing, fleeing for his life, with men more vicious than wolves on his trail. The chase ranged over hundreds of miles of wild and broken country and more than once, Ben Morgan felt the pursuit breathing down his neck and knew the clutching fear of being trapped.

But he was a tough man to kill himself. He stayed out in front despite the chase, despite danger and hunger and every kind of privation. He fought off capture and death in a hundred different forms through months of chase, to come back to Roaring River when the time was ripe and face his enemies in a gun-blazing showdown fight.

●

GUNS OF THE ARROWHEAD by Gordon Young

Another of the excellent and famous Red Clark novels by Gordon Young. Red Clark breezed into Tulluco in spite of the hardcases who hung out there and who had no love for him. Red carried two guns and figured he could look out for himself.

Trouble started pronto. A gambler named Joe Bush hit a girl and Red jumped him for it. The gambler pulled a bowie knife and Red pulled a gun.

The knife missed, but the gun didn't. The gambler cashed in his chips.

His pals were annoyed by this and set an ambush for Red which backfired when Clark's twin guns gave them a double dose of lead that was more than they could take. Really sore now, they slapped a price tag of $1000 on the russet scalp of Red Clark. Whether anyone collected it or not, they thought it would scare Red out of town.

It wasn't a good guess. Far from scaring him out of town, nothing could have been better designed to keep him there. An old feud between two ranches—the Arrowhead and the Hepple outfit—was flaring up again and Red whose sympathies were with Arrowhead, stepped in to lead its fighting crew into battle and to clean up the gang who had insulted him by putting such a low price on his head.

This is top-flight Red Clark stuff, written by a master story-teller.

THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 8)

job, but he was promptly saddled with the job of finding a mysterious killer known as The Copperhead, a killer who had the quaint custom of leaving his victim with a playing card in his hand, as though the dead man had been trying to fill a hand and was checked by death. Nice feller.

Anyway, you'll get a bang out of Sunset's troubles, told in the wry humorous style which only Tuttle can do. There's laughs and chills in it and some new Tuttle characters you'll enjoy meeting.

Another Boo Boo Yarn

Also scheduled is your old friend Boo Boo Bounce in a new adventure, BLAZE OF GLORY AND NO MISTAKE. These Boo Boo Bounce yarns are written, you'll remember, by Ben Frank, and it is our personal opinion that in BLAZE OF GLORY AND NO MISTAKE, author Frank has turned out one of the funniest Boo Boo Bounce yarns that ever came from his typewriter.

Boo Boo is not feeling too chipper, so he goes to the Doc and finds he has only days to live. After the first shock is over, Boo Boo decides that as long as he is going to die he might as well go out in a blaze of glory and no mistake, so he becomes very brave indeed.

Losing his normal fear of guns, Boo Boo promptly performs such a series of hair-raising feats that the town, which had always had its own opinion of his courage, falls at his feet and elevates him to the position of a national hero. Bank robbers mean nothing to Boo Boo—bullets whistling about him never make him turn a hair. Then—but let's not give the show away. Read it and howl. And let me know if you don't think this is the best Boo Boo ever.

That's not all, of course. GIANT WESTERN is a big magazine and there'll be heaps more stories, features, and departments to fill out a fat contents page of solid reading.

THE MAIL BAG

WELL, the dog days are done and the crisp weather of autumn is ahead, which should spur you letter-writing rannies to perk up and drop the old Ramrod a note. We are always plumb tickled to get a word now and then from "faithful reader" or his brother and we like to see which stories you like and how our choice coincides with yours.

The August number was quite a thing. SHOWDOWN ON THE HOGBACK was right up to Jim Mayo's standards—lots of fightin', boy! How many men did he kill in that thing, anyway? The Tuttle story was so-so, I've

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seen better from him and STAGECOACH was a peach. Seltzer? Is he still writing for you?

—Doug Revere, Northampton, Mass.

To answer your last question first, Seltzer is not writing, no. The famous western author has been dead for some time. But FEUD ON LITTLE ELK is a story we discovered that had never been published. Getting it into print is kind of a historical event, since Seltzer has now taken his place among the western classics. Glad you liked SHOWDOWN ON THE HOGBACK, that was a rip-roaring story, wasn't it?

Where does your John Black come off with that ONE AGAINST MANY story about Wild Bill Hickok fighting off 50 Confederate cavalrymen? Hickok was the worst liar in the West and has been thoroughly discredited. If he said he fought off 50 Confederate soldiers it was more likely he had an argument with a paralyzed old lady and her six-year-old grandson when he was stealing their cow. I'm disgusted!

—Arthur C. Barbey, Los Angeles, Calif.

That's kind of a harsh verdict on old Wild Bill, son. He always spoke kindly of you, as the gag goes. But the truth is that nobody can tell exactly about these legends of Wild Bill. There are two schools of thought on him—one makes him a hero and the other refuses to believe anything he said about himself. We print both sides, as a matter of fact, and we've had stories debunking old Wild Bill, too. You reads 'em and you takes your choice.

GIANT WESTERN is the best magazine on the stands, in my opinion, so how about getting more Walt Coburn stories? HANGED MAN'S REP in the June number was a honey. That and PISTOLS FOR TWO had it all over the other stories.

—Louis C. Cavendish, Baton Rouge, La.

More Coburns are in the works, Lou. Keep your eye on GIANT WESTERN.

THE PHANTOM SPUR was good fun. I like the humorous kind. Can't we have more long ones like that?

—Elsie Burkholter, Miami, Fla.

We'll be on the lookout for more of that kind. And now friends, that just about uses up our time, so let's be roll-

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ing along. Don't forget to drop the old Ramrod a line. Just address The Ramrod, GIANT WESTERN MAGAZINE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. A letter or a postcard will do; let us know what you think of the forthcoming issues of the magazine. And until then, thanks, everybody, and happy reading.

—The Ramrod

Indian Values

Facts About Pioneer Trading

By WILLIAM CARTER

WHITE traders in Kansas and Iowa, in the early part of the Nineteenth Century, were surprised to discover that the Indians in these territories had a uniform scheme of values which they employed in trading.

A belt was the smallest object. Two belts were worth a deer hide or a wolf skin. A deer hide was worth a pair of moccasins. Two pairs of moccasins were worth a knife.

A knife and a pair of moccasins were worth an ax. Two knives were worth a pair of leggings or a shirt. Two knives and a pair of leggings were worth a blanket. Two knives, a pair of leggings and a blanket, were worth an old rifle.

Two knives, leggings, a blanket and a rifle were worth a horse. Two knives, leggings, blanket, rifle and a horse, were worth a tent made of skins, or a wife.

All of these mentioned items put together were worth a male slave who would do one's hunting!

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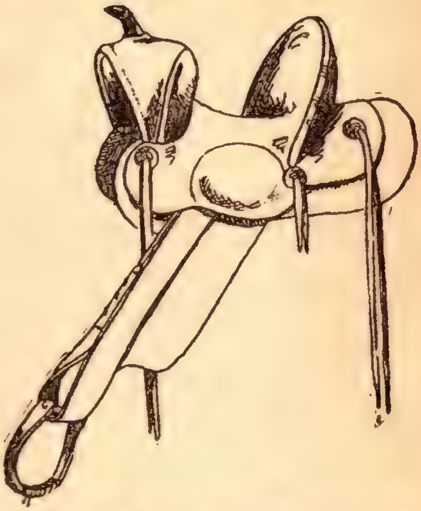

Interesting True Facts About the Western Cowman's "Hull"

By SIMPSON M. RITTER

THE Western cowman's saddle or "hull," with horn in front and abbreviated back rest, dates back to Asia of the second or third century of this era. Back at that time men learned that they needed a saddle that would keep them mounted with a minimum of effort and free their hands for other purposes—work or battle.

The high cantle and pommel saddle-spread were common in the Middle and Near East by Mohammed's time. When the Moors invaded Europe a little later they did so primarily with cavalry, and the workable saddle soon became common to Europe as well. Saddles of knights of this period and later, preserved in European museums, differ hardly at all from those of our Western riders.

Even after the Moors were driven out of their last stronghold in Europe about the time Columbus embarked on his voyage, and knighthood met its deathknell at the battle of Fornovo from French artillery, this saddle continued as the best for cavalrymen and mounted workmen.

When the Spaniards came to the new

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world they brought cows and horses and the utilitarian saddle with the high pommel and high cantle. The cows increased in Mexico, in Texas and in New Mexico, and the cowboy, originally predominantly of Spanish or Spanish-Indian extraction, found this saddle best for his purpose.

When in the thirties of the last century great numbers of Americans began moving into the cow country they adopted the "Mexican" saddle, as they called it, as the most serviceable. If they made any changes with time it was to add another hole to the cinch strap and to build the horn out of steel rather than breakable wood.

American cavalry from the Revolution on had used a modified form of this saddle. When American troops came West for the war with Mexico changes were made. The new saddles had higher pommels and cantles than those carried over from the British army.

Even the idea of adorning one's saddle with fancy silverwork goes back to the ancient Asiatics.

Answers to Questions on Page 143

1. "Instead of hunting gold," thundered Brigham Young, "let every man go to work at raising wheat, oats, barley, corn and vegetables and fruit in abundance that there may be plenty in the land!"

2. Few longhorns were raised in Wyoming. This country was stocked mostly by Durhams and Shorthorns trailed east from Oregon, after the Sioux were crushed in the campaign of 1876.

3. A "quarter-horse" is a chunky animal bred for quick stops and starts, so that it makes a good cutting horse. It is also the fastest kind of sprinter —for short distance races.

4. Ben Thompson and the equally famous badman King Fisher, were killed together in a fight in San Antonio with Joe Foster, a little, bespectacled gambler, and a Mexican policeman named Coy. The fight took place on the balcony of the old "Vaudeville" theatre.

5. Any rifle in the Old West, regardless of make, was usually called a Winchester and in some regions this was jokingly corrupted to Worcestershire.

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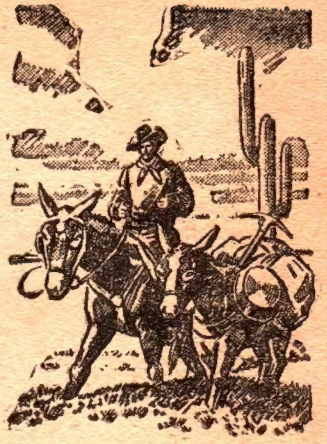

The Story of a Gold Seeker

AMONG the lucky gold seekers of 1850 one should include "Strike" Johnstone, whose mother christened him Percival. "Strike," a Kentucky farm hand, was one of the tens of thousands who came around the Cape in rickety ships.

There was less than $100 left in his pockets when he hit San Francisco. A Mr. Miles needed a teamster to haul some supplies up to Sacramento. That was "Strike's" first stroke of good luck. In exchange for his labors, Miles gave the young farm hand, at the end of the run, a set of mining tools and twenty dollars' worth of bacon, flour and coffee.

"Strike" staked a claim in a region others had already abandoned. He was quite willing to take the leavings. The first six weeks he panned a total of $200 worth of gold. Then he hit it. A whole vein in the rock. It assayed at $40 per hundred pounds of rock and in the second six-week period "Strike" garnered more than $2,000 worth of gold. He hired help and from then on for almost a year his profit exceeded $200 a day. At the end of a year "Strike" sold out for $60,000 to the same Mr. Miles who had given him his first chance.

Stopping at a fancy hotel in San Francisco, he was approached by a prospector who needed a stake and offered him half of whatever gold he found. Pleased with his own success, "Strike" gave the man $400, never expecting to see him again. But—the prospector was Martin Blue, whose Yellow Hand mine on the American River yielded upward of one million dollars within the next eight years!

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